

**Feeding the Hunger of History:  
Society and Politics in Dylan Thomas's Prose  
and Dramatic Works**

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For my daughter,  
Claudia Rose Thorogood



## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues for a much more considered and nuanced reading of Dylan Thomas's political outlook than extant criticism has tended to present. It makes a case for the reading of Thomas's socialism as intrinsic to his ethical vision, and explores this through close analytical attention to his prose and dramatic work. It proceeds by considering how those political views were formed and reformed, and contextualises them alongside and against the political expressions of his contemporaries, notably the 'Auden Group'. Particular attention is paid to the socialist undertones of Thomas's film scripts and radio plays of the 1930s and 1940s, his radio broadcasts and short stories, and the argument is framed within, and draws substantially on, existing criticism. Socialism is explored here in both the strong, ideological sense, and in a more understated concern with the practices and interdependencies of the small communities that Thomas places at the heart of his creative work.

The thesis concludes that Thomas largely rejected the more theoretical party politics of the Left in favour of an emotionally-direct expression of his political beliefs that aligned more closely with his 'poetic' voice, and that this approach was arrived at through his work as a short story writer and scriptwriter for film and radio. It argues that *Under Milk Wood* is, consequently, the most developed example of this style, and proposes a reading of the play against the backdrop of post-war recovery and renewal, drawing on Thomas's political and social views.



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## INTRODUCTION

His socialism was basically Tolstoyan, the attempt of the spiritual aristocrat to hold in one embrace the good heart of mankind, a gesture and a purpose uncontaminated by the *realpolitik* of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

...you could never pin a label on Dylan and say that he was a Socialist or a Communist or an anarchist or anything else – he was far out on the left in politics. He believed in the freedom of man to be man, that he shouldn't be oppressed by his fellows, and that every man had the stamp of divinity on him, and anything that prevented that divinity having full play was an evil thing.<sup>2</sup>

In 1944 [...] Thomas wanted the Communist Party cultural journal *Our Time* to publish "Ceremony After a Fire Raid", and "pressed" the poem "upon [Arnold] Rattenbury because, he said, he wanted to advertise that he remained a Socialist". [...] On his 1952 visit to America, he also agreed to do a poetry reading for the Socialist Party of the U.S.A. without expecting his usual fee.<sup>3</sup>

I, too, belong to no political party. I am a Socialist, and, so far as I know, there is no Socialist party.<sup>4</sup>

Determining whether or not Dylan Thomas was a Socialist is made difficult by past attempts to define, even shape, his politics. Notably, one famous early biographer, John Malcolm Brinnin, claimed that he was not a Socialist (rather, he adopted or developed some form of spiritual aristocracy), whilst a life-long friend, Bert Trick, claimed that Thomas was beyond Socialism. Victor Paananen persuasively argues that he was an active supporter of an organised, party-political Socialism, and then Thomas himself writes that he was a Socialist but not a member of a Socialist party, as one did not, to his mind, exist. This somewhat confusing group of statements clearly points to a complexity in the nature of Thomas's politics, and, moreover, suggests that somewhere in Thomas's frustratingly recursive statement above there is, indeed, the truth of his political beliefs, albeit one which would defy straightforward

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Golightly, "Writing in dreams and blood": Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 67-91 (p. 68).|

<sup>2</sup> *Dylan Remembered – Vol. 1, 1914 – 1934*, ed. by David N. Thomas (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press Ltd., 2003), p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Paananen, 'The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 46-66 (pp. 51-52).

<sup>4</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 889.

explanation. It is, therefore, my intention to avoid trying to prove beyond doubt whether Thomas was a Socialist (according to one or other definition), and instead examine the Socialist themes in his works, how they emerge in his depiction of society, and how they evolved over time in relation (and reaction) to the turbulent period during which Thomas lived and wrote.

The unconventional, informal nature of Thomas's political beliefs may explain why the prevailing view of Thomas has been changing as critics have gone back over the wealth of material that he left, and as the even greater wealth of material that has been written about Thomas since he died has been addressed. It is a reassessment that has been driven, in part, by the relatively recent publication of the film scripts in 1995, as well as what appears to be a shift away from the more biographically-informed response to his work towards something more recognisably critical and historically aware (notable exceptions notwithstanding, such as Ralph Maud's excellent *Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry* (1963)).<sup>5</sup> The scripts, when taken alongside the better-known prose works, point towards a compassionate view of society, one sympathetic to the pressures of life, especially where the working class is concerned, and it is this aspect of Thomas's writing, as well as the political beliefs that they imply, that I shall explore fully in the research presented here.

Like many others, I have admired Thomas's works since I was young, having read 'The Hunchback in the Park' as a child at school. It came as a surprise to me that the author of the poem, and of innumerable other poems of subtle, sensitive articulation, was also the author of a cutting parody of the Nazi Party in which Hitler describes himself as a 'A spy on socialists and communists, A hater of Jews and Trade Unions',<sup>6</sup> Goebbels declares 'that the Liberty of the Press was one of the greatest abuses of Democracy' and Goering proclaims the merits of

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of this new approach include Victor Golightly, "Writing in dreams and blood": Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 67-91 and Victor Paananen, 'The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 46-66, both of which appeared in the same journal.

<sup>6</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 41.

‘Gangsterism, brute force, wealth for the few, cocaine and murder’.<sup>7</sup> It did not seem like something that Thomas would write. Moreover, the author of ‘Fern Hill’ and ‘If my head hurt a hare’s foot’ also gave a radio talk on the sufferings of the people of Iran in a work entitled ‘Persian Oil’, visiting the country to research the piece. The language is not too dissimilar in places to his poetry, but the work as a whole is more despondent and far more polemical and aggressive than might be expected from Thomas. The way he describes the children that he sees in a hospital in Tehran as ‘suffering from starvation; their eyes were enormous, seeing everything and nothing, their bellies bloated, their matchstick arms hung round with blue, wrinkled flesh’<sup>8</sup> is noticeably atypical in terms of style when compared to Thomas’s poetic voice. Similarly, his description of the children of Abadan (where the eponymous ‘Persian Oil’ is refined) are ‘three-quarter naked, filthy, hungry, beautiful with smiles and great burning eyes and wild hair’.<sup>9</sup> The ‘philosophic buzzards’ that ‘wheeled above them’ are something that one might expect to find in a Ted Hughes poem, not in a work by Thomas. Thomas ends ‘Persian Oil’ with ‘The rich are rich. Oil’s oily. And the poor are waiting’.<sup>10</sup> Within days of his return to Britain a revolution had indeed taken place in Iran.

It is the overt political message that stands out on reading and re-reading works such as this. Thomas’s relationship with ‘The communist grocer’ Bert Trick in his early Swansea days is well established,<sup>11</sup> but to find in his later works (‘Persian Oil’, for example, dates from 1951) language such as that discussed above prompts deeper reflection on the *non*-poetic writings a little more than has been done to date. Indeed, the further the focus moves away from the

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<sup>7</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 243.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example: ‘Disgusted with capitalism and fascism, [Trick] looked hopefully to socialism to build a better and more spiritual future, where good literature would find its place as naturally as social benefits. Thomas seized on all of this, and for a while was a muddled disciple of Trick, who regarded him fondly as a brilliant but erratic younger brother. [...] But the workless factories and coal mines were not very noticeable in middle-class Uplands [where Thomas lived with his family in 1933]. The dole queues were on the other side of town. Bert Trick did his best to bring them closer for Thomas’. (Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography (New Edition)* (London: Phoenix, 2000), pp. 81-82.

poetry, the more one questions the abiding perception of Thomas formed by, amongst others, his friends and biographers Constantine FitzGibbon and John Malcolm Brinnin, and the more visible becomes the Socialist that Paananen identified.

What was the abiding perception of Thomas's contemporaries though? Certainly not one of a political writer, with Brinnin, for example, writing that:

Dylan's political naïveté, it seemed to me, was a consequence of his promiscuous affection for humanity and of his need for emotional identification with the lowest stratum of society. His socialism was basically Tolstoyan, the attempt of the spiritual aristocrat to hold in one embrace the good heart of mankind, a gesture and a purpose uncontaminated by the *realpolitik* of the twentieth century [...] his attitude was a kind of stance unsupported by knowledge, almost in defiance of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

This view of Thomas, as naïve, 'promiscuous', a 'spiritual aristocrat' living 'almost in defiance of knowledge', lasted for nearly half a century. What makes such a statement questionable nowadays is the wealth of evidence that directly contradicts it, evidence which has only now gathered enough weight to support a critical reassessment of Thomas's 'stance'.

Thomas made his career as a poet at a time when poets were setting a very high standard. He was first published in the 1930s, when T. S. Eliot was still writing and editing, when W. B. Yeats, though nearing the end of his life, was still very much active, and, perhaps more importantly, when W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice and Cecil Day-Lewis were creating a new, more overtly politicised style of poetry, as a reaction to, amongst other things, both the Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939) and the Second World War. To this list could be added numerous other writers, such as (though not limited to) Robert Frost, E. E. Cummings, Theodore Roethke, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom contributed to the high standard of poetry being written at the time. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Thomas is most noted for his poetry, having excelled in such capable company, and,

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<sup>12</sup> Victor Gollightly, "'Writing in dreams and blood': Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea", *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 67-91 (p. 68).

therefore, that the critical responses to his work tend to focus on his poetic output. However (and this is where this thesis will help to fill the gap), Thomas expended a considerable amount of time and effort on his prose and other writings. He wrote numerous works for radio, such as *Under Milk Wood*, *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, and *Return Journey*; he wrote a number of short stories, some of which were collected under the title *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* and published in 1940; he also started (but never completed) a novel, *Adventures in the Skin Trade* (1941), and he completed a number of film scripts. Add to this plans for an opera with Stravinsky, as well as numerous other projects unconnected to his poetry (the reading tours he undertook in America, for example), and we find that Thomas was increasingly a writer of works other than poetry.

Thomas's prose voice rapidly evolved. He began by writing in a gory, surrealist style with short stories such as 'The Tree' (1933), in which a neurotic child, obsessed with the crucifixion, ends the work by nailing a lost, mentally ill wanderer to the tree at the bottom of his garden. In a very short space of time, however, Thomas abandoned this kind of phantasmagoria altogether, in favour of a more realistic, autobiographical approach. One possible reason for this change in Thomas's prose voice was his increasing interest in both politics and society. He had recently started work as a reporter for the local newspaper and was spending more time in the company of people involved on the political Left. I shall look at this shift, and the reasons behind it, in more detail during the chapter on *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*.

The suggestion that Thomas might be a 'political' writer to any extent is a relatively new, and still largely unsupported, one. Raymond Williams proposes that *Under Milk Wood* represented a move away from the immature self-absorption of much of his better-known

poetry towards a sense of a ‘more varied world’<sup>13</sup> and a deeper insight into the community as a whole, however this is contrary to the abiding opinion and the majority of readings of his work undertaken prior to the publication of the film scripts. Indeed, it seems as if critics have traditionally struggled to recognise, engage with, and frame Thomas’s politics, and so chose to diminish their importance in favour of other, more traditionally ‘poetic’ aspects of his work. Henry Treece, Thomas’s first published critic, came unstuck when writing his book *Dylan Thomas: Dog Among the Fairies* on this very point. In correspondence with Treece on the book, Thomas declared, ‘it is surely evasive to say that my poetry has no social awareness,’ with Thomas continuing, ‘You are right when you suggest that I think a squirrel stumbling of equal importance to Hitler’s invasions [and] murder in Spain [...] but I *am* aware of these things as well’.<sup>14</sup>

Even though Thomas was, like so many other writers and artists during his lifetime, a politicised individual (‘anti-fascist’, to use Jackson’s term),<sup>15</sup> it would be a mistake to argue that his poetry belongs in the canon of 1930s political writers. Poets such as Auden and Spender are inextricably linked with that decade and with the very notion of poetry as political action, whereas Thomas goes as far as to write in one letter that ‘you can’t mix party and poetry’.<sup>16</sup> As I will argue, Thomas was as concerned with society and Socialism as the political writers of the 1930s, but whereas Spender, Day-Lewis, Auden or MacNeice would write their political beliefs into their poetry, Thomas instead wrote his into his prose, broadcasts and scripts. Correspondence and accounts from contemporaries of Thomas suggest that he was often critical of Auden, writing in one letter that he was ‘socially harmless’ and too easily won over

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<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Dylan Thomas’s Play for Voices’, in *Dylan Thomas, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by C. B. Cox (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1987), pp. 89-98 (p. 90).

<sup>14</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 359.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Jackson, ‘Dylan Thomas: The Anti-Fascist Propagandist’, in *Dylan Thomas: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. by Hannah Ellis (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, Plc, 2014), pp. 87-101 (p. 87).

<sup>16</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 212.



by the moneyed classes,<sup>17</sup> and as Theodore Roethke would point out after Thomas's death, 'The bourgeois he did not love'.<sup>18</sup> Auden's group was too bourgeois for Thomas's liking, and his stance regarding the nature of poetry was as much aesthetic defiance as political choice. In this respect, and with regards to Thomas's comment on 'party and poetry', it is perhaps easier to appreciate why Thomas might have objected to turning his poetry into a mouth-piece for the Communist Party of Great Britain. Thomas's place amongst the political writers of the time will be discussed further in the *Radio Scripts* chapter.

Before Henry Treece, Thomas's friend and fellow poet, Vernon Watkins, was one of the few to seek to understand Thomas in overtly literary terms, and yet, by interweaving his personal admiration for Thomas into much of the critique, Watkins inadvertently (or deliberately) set the tone for much of the criticism to come. This is important precisely because of the way Watkins himself emphasised aspects of Thomas's character and their effect on his poetry whilst avoiding any discussion of Thomas's politics. For better or for worse, Vernon as critic introduced the familiar, gregarious 'Dylan', his friend, thereby setting a precedent for interpreting Thomas's works through a lens of informality and kinship that blurred the lines of critical understanding. In 1935, having read Thomas's *18 Poems*, Watkins (harbouring the desire to be a published poet himself)<sup>19</sup> had visited Thomas on the advice of Thomas's uncle, the Reverend David Rees,<sup>20</sup> and, until the end of Thomas's life, Watkins was a friend, benefactor and sounding board, as well as being godfather to Thomas's first son, Llewelyn. Thomas's correspondence to Watkins, collected into *Letters to Vernon Watkins* by the recipient in 1957, is useful despite many of the letters having gone missing whilst Watkins was away on Military Service.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, as Watkins remarks in his introduction:

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<sup>17</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p.346.

<sup>18</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet*, ed. by Ernest Tedlock, (Surrey: Windmoll Press Ltd, 1960), p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Watkins's *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems* appeared in 1941.

<sup>20</sup> *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, ed. by Vernon Watkins (London: Dent, 1957), p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

The years, in fact, which are not here represented by letters, were years when we saw each other more often than at any time since he left Swansea. The letters that came then were more often notes arranging to meet, the discussion of poems being postponed until this meeting, when the exact analysis of his written self-criticism gave way to the concise and lightning judgements of his conversation.<sup>22</sup>

From 1941 to 1944, therefore, we have an incomplete record of their literary dialogue, though it can be assumed, in light of Watkins's testimony, that 'discussion of poems' continued in much the same way. It is for this reason that Watkins might be considered the first critic of Thomas rather than Treece, since he was the first to engage with the themes of Thomas's poetry and, moreover, the intent behind much of his œuvre, which Chris Baldick identified as 'an opposing current of flamboyant irrationalism' distinct from the 'cool intellectual tone' of Auden,<sup>23</sup> which is as good a way of summarising the general view of Thomas and his relationship to his contemporaries as any.

The letters testify to Watkins's awareness of the 'flamboyant irrationalism' that Thomas hoped to articulate. It should be borne in mind, however, that Watkins was at heart a defender of Thomas's poetry (and Thomas the man) as much as anything else, with an appreciation of the risks that Thomas was prone to taking. As he wrote, again in his introduction to *Letters*, 'I tried to persuade Dylan to leave two of the poems out of the new book *Twenty-five* [...] for me these two poems presented a face of unwarrantable obscurity'.<sup>24</sup> Defending their inclusion, Thomas remarked, 'Give them a bone'.<sup>25</sup> Not wishing to overstate the importance of a passing remark that was itself reported second-hand by Watkins more than two decades after it was uttered, it is worth noting that Thomas, throughout his friendship with Watkins, never seems to have viewed Watkins as one of 'them', as a critic, despite the great

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<sup>22</sup> *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, ed. by Vernon Watkins (London: Dent, 1957), p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History, Volume 10. 1910-1940, The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 108.

<sup>24</sup> The two poems were *Now* and *How soon the servant sun*. (*Letters to Vernon Watkins*, ed. by Vernon Watkins (London: Dent, 1957), p. 16).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

deal of input and critique he offered. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Thomas is remarkably candid with Watkins about the form and meaning of much of his poetic work (there is very little discussion of his other works), giving critics a first-hand interpretation of his poetry with which to affirm or discount notions of their own. Indeed, from the letters we would be able to justifiably position Thomas firmly within the metaphysical tradition, his *raison d'être*, as Watkins defined it, being founded on the idea that 'natural observation meant nothing to us without the support of metaphysical truth'.<sup>26</sup> Watkins's sense of kinship in the pursuit of this 'truth' makes his reading of Thomas's work both astute and invaluable, as well as familiar and friendly.

At the heart of the correspondence, only half of which survives (since Thomas kept none of Watkins's letters to him),<sup>27</sup> is an overt self-interest on the part of Thomas, a self-interest made more pertinent by the one-sidedness of the extant records. For critical purposes, this is by no means a bad thing. As Watkins notes, with a hint of academic relish:

As it is, there is a rightness in all his intuitive statements about poetry and an honesty in his destructive criticism which makes these letters the closest commentary on his own poems that will ever be written.<sup>28</sup>

As a contemporary of Thomas, whose literary ambitions and motivations seemed to have dovetailed Thomas's own, Watkins offered the first sympathetic reading of a poet who attracted as much scorn as he did acclaim. However, he was, like so many critics to come, deeply affected by his relationship to Thomas. John Ackerman cites Watkins as '[t]he Anglo-Welsh poet whose work bears the closest relationship to that of Dylan Thomas'.<sup>29</sup> On no single point, nor in general, does Ackerman refute the assertions of Watkins and claim superior insight. For Ackerman, Watkins should be viewed as a poet who 'aided Thomas in his search for an

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<sup>26</sup> *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, ed. by Vernon Watkins (London: Dent, 1957), p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 22.

expression of faith'.<sup>30</sup> Ackerman's claim that Watkins's contribution to the artistic and intellectual milieu in which Thomas worked was one of gentle moral persuasion does, however, serve to create a critical vacuum into which Ackerman stepped as the impartial, almost secular, more coldly critical commentator. Indeed, his own defining contribution seems to have been to underplay Watkins's poetic input and instead focus on the healthy rapport that sustained an increasingly introspective Thomas, whose 'search for an expression of faith' was aided by no less than Watkins's 'personality and work'.<sup>31</sup>

At the time the first edition of *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* appeared in 1964,<sup>32</sup> the divergence of opinion regarding Thomas and his poetry was already well established. Watkins noted that Thomas, considered within a broader discourse on his religious feelings, was 'a poet narrow and severe with himself and wide and forgiving in his affections', and, as a consequence of this, 'Dylan Thomas presents, in retrospect, the greatest paradox of our time'.<sup>33</sup> Ackerman's critical study, though aware of the more anarchic aspects of Thomas's behaviour (which he ascribes to 'hypersensitivity', his eagerness to assume 'the rôle of poet and *enfant terrible*', and, most bafflingly, the continuance of a childhood 'liking of parody' evident in his juvenilia),<sup>34</sup> seems to favour the representation of Thomas 'as a lost Nonconformist'<sup>35</sup> and reveals a marked reluctance to critically engage the paradox Watkins identified. Furthermore, Thomas's political views are again almost entirely overlooked, reduced to a report of his brief flirtation with the Communist Party and a quote from the March 1947 issue of *Strand* magazine, in which he is reported to have said, 'One should tolerate the Labour Government because running down Labour eventually brings you alongside the

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<sup>30</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> The present, third edition, which is used here, was published in 1996, which attests to its influence.

<sup>33</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 158.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

Conservatives, which is the last place you want to be'.<sup>36</sup> Thomas's association with Bert Trick, a revolutionary socialist with whom Thomas spent much of 1931-4, is noticeably omitted here, as is any study of three distinctly political poems – 'The hand that signed the paper' (1936), 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid' (1946) and 'Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred' (1943). Indeed, Ackerman discusses only one of Thomas's more political poems, namely 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London', which deals with a young girl dying in an air-raid and the poet's repudiation of any sentimentalising of her demise. Ackerman views this poem as an indication that Thomas had 'outgrown the earlier rebellious and blasphemous attitudes of the *enfant terrible*' and that he 'wishes to accept the natural and inevitable processes of life. He is the religious artist who celebrates life'.<sup>37</sup> Compare this to Andrew Lycett's reading of the poem in his 2003 biography of Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life*:

He conveyed his disgust at the manner of this young girl's death (in an air-raid) by affirming, in a hymnic voice that took off from the whirling organ sound of 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid', that he would not trivialise her passing with the usual sort of personalised elegy. But after the Christian sentiment of some of his poetry, such as 'Vision and Prayer', this was unavowedly unreligious.<sup>38</sup>

It would be easy to leap upon Ackerman's charge that the Thomas of 1945 was a reformed blasphemer and suggest instead that Ackerman was seized at some point during his reading of the poem by a religious mania of his own, especially if we consider the last line, 'After the first death, there is no other', which Lycett, among others, convincingly interprets as a rejection of the notion of an afterlife.<sup>39</sup> However, the contrast between the two interpretations could not be starker. We can look to Thomas himself to rebut many of

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<sup>36</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 31. Cf. Victor Golightly's "'Writing with dreams and blood": Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea' in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, Volume 8 (2003).

<sup>37</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003), p. 222.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 222.

Ackerman's more earnest explications on 'A Refusal to Mourn'<sup>40</sup> by referring to a letter he wrote to a student in 1951 which was later published in *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*. He writes:

I have never sat down and studied the Bible, never consciously echoed its language, and am, in reality, as ignorant of it as most brought-up Christians [...] I *have* used a few difficult words in early poems, but they are easily looked-up and were, in any case, thrown into poems in a kind of adolescent showing-off which I hope I have now discarded.<sup>41</sup>

For some contemporaries of Thomas, then, the defence of the poet *as a man*, seemingly rich in poetic genuflection and wordy penitence, became its own cottage industry. It became a way of saving 'Dylan', as it were. This was due, in part, to criticism from, amongst many others, Kingsley Amis and Robert Graves,<sup>42</sup> figures who in one way or another attacked Thomas both as a man and as a poet. Another such derogator was Julian Symons, and again it was Henry Treece, writing in 1949 (four years before Thomas's death) who sought to answer, in as impartial and engaging a way as possible, the most common accusation levelled at Thomas, an accusation to which Symons seems to have subscribed. Treece dedicates the entirety of the eleventh chapter of *Dog Among the Fairies* to the question 'Is Dylan a fake?', prompted, he says, by Symons's 'indictment that Dylan's poems are "Jokes, rhetorical, intellectual fakes of the highest class"'.<sup>43</sup> Through detailed textual analysis of several works from *Twenty-five Poems*, Treece delineates clear refutations of Thomas's works as examples of 'counterfeit, swindle or sham', whilst accepting that, in certain circumstances, Thomas has

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<sup>40</sup> For example, the suggestion that Thomas 'had in mind the ancient and barbaric custom (referred to in Judges ix. 45) of scattering salt on an enemy's land to make it infertile'. (John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), pp. 117-118).

<sup>41</sup> Dylan Thomas, 'Notes on the Art of Poetry', *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. by James Scully (Glasgow: Collins, 1977), 195-202 (p. 199).

<sup>42</sup> Graves said, 'One of the disheartening features of our civilization...is that men, preposterous men, have succeeded in convincing public and critics alike that they are poets. Dylan Thomas, for example, was an admirable alcoholic, but little else'. Arnold Sherman, 'A Talk with Robert Graves: English Poet in Majorca' in *Conversations With Robert Graves* ed. by Frank L. Kersnowski (Jackson; London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 32-37 (p. 34).

<sup>43</sup> Henry Treece, *Dylan Thomas, 'Dog among the Fairies'* (London: L. Drummond, 1949), p. 129.

an ‘extravagant taste of fine words’ in ‘these times of rationing’.<sup>44</sup> He concludes that ‘Hopkins, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Swinburne and a dozen others would stand convicted’ of a similar offence if tried in his imagined, post-war court.<sup>45</sup> Treece also concedes that Thomas has ‘*a limited vocabulary*’ which ‘may produce an obscurity’,<sup>46</sup> and this he ascribes to ‘a fault of technique’, adding that it is ‘not one which denounces the integrity of the poet as poet’,<sup>47</sup> Treece delicately sidestepping the issue of Thomas’s integrity as a man on this occasion. T. S. Eliot, who, as founder and editor of *The Criterion*, published Thomas’s short story ‘The Orchards’, is held up by Treece as antithetical to Thomas in embodying ‘the supreme poetic importance of this balance between *experience* and *technique*’ which Eliot espoused in his introduction to the poems of Ezra Pound. However, even Thomas’s imbalance, Treece acknowledges, is responsible for much of the ‘charm’ of his work.<sup>48</sup>

Treece differs from both Watkins and Ackerman in not appearing to be an outright defender of Thomas. His critical study, the first to be published, does at times read like the gentle finger-wagging of a schoolmaster, however he consistently draws us back to the promise of a poet who stood in counterpoint to contemporaries who ‘sift and refine their original poetic impulses’ due to their ‘craftsmen-repressions’ and a desire to ‘be comprehended by the greatest number of readers’.<sup>49</sup> Responding to the effusive claim of W. J. Turner that Thomas is ‘a major poet’,<sup>50</sup> Treece concludes Chapter Eleven by saying ‘Dylan Thomas is not yet a major poet, because he is not yet a fully realised man: but there is hope that one day he will justify W. J. Turner’s description’.<sup>51</sup> It is this kind of appreciation of Thomas as a fallible, at times faulty poet and man that made Treece such an interesting contributor to the evolving nature of the

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<sup>44</sup>Henry Treece, *Dylan Thomas, ‘Dog among the Fairies’* (London: L. Drummond, 1949), p. 129.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 131.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 132. The italics are Treece’s.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 134-135. Again, the italics are Treece’s own.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p.123.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 128.

critical understanding of Thomas, as is his positioning of Thomas in counterpoint to his contemporaries (Auden, Spender, *et al*, amongst them). The claim could be made that it was because Treece was writing whilst Thomas was still alive that such a fine mix of reproach, familiarity and encouragement was possible, as the aftermath of Thomas's untimely death in 1953 opened the floodgates to eulogia, grief and, above all else, sentimentality, with its consequential backlash (from, amongst other, the Movement poets) following not far behind. As a result of this, many early studies of Thomas read like bastardised biographies, making grand assumptions about Thomas's beliefs – be they religious, artistic or, fleetingly, political – based on interviews or casual conversation, with conjecture, no matter how well-informed, playing a large part in the analysis.

One critic who does, however, manage to successfully marry biographical detail with textual interpretation is Walford Davies. Unlike Treece, Davies seems cautious never to cross the line into schoolmasterly condescension whilst still pointing out what he considers to be flaws in Thomas's approach.<sup>52</sup> There is an accessibility to his critique which seems more in keeping with the sociable, egalitarian spirit of Thomas's ethos, and it is, therefore, no surprise to find that the widely available *Collected Poems* (Phoenix, 2001) contains textual notes supplied by Davies and by Ralph Maud, with whom Davies has collaborated on other works.<sup>53</sup> While it could be argued that Treece benefitted from writing his critical study of Thomas's works before Thomas died, Davies benefitted from writing his own studies some time after the dust of Thomas's death had settled. Although there is little doubting Davies' admiration for Thomas, there is far less of the anecdote-based conjecture so typical of Watkins's writing, and none of the remodelling of Thomas as penitent acolyte serving the needs of a forgiving

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<sup>52</sup> Writing of *Under Milk Wood*, Davies affirms that 'the play's 'stage-Welshness' will always be understandable' despite the suggestion that 'an implicit truce regarding *Under Milk Wood* has been signed' in his Introduction to Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. xxxiii.

<sup>53</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2001).



Christian God that preoccupies Ackerman. Davies' introduction to the definitive edition of *Under Milk Wood* serves as an exemplar of this mode of impersonal approach, and is a major source for my own study of the play. Tracing the seed of the conception of the play back to an idea Thomas and Bert Trick had discussed 'to write a Welsh *Ulysses*', Davies goes on to suggest that the 'Circe' episode of *Ulysses* ('itself a kind of "play for voices"') offered Thomas a model for the detailed, exhaustive introductory character descriptions which are read by the two 'Voices' of *Under Milk Wood*.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Davies continues the Joyce comparison, expanding on Thomas's description of Swansea as 'little Dublin'<sup>55</sup> and the 'Joycean' style of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, suggesting they point to a clear stylistic influence on Thomas's works across his career.<sup>56</sup>

Ackerman, in contrast, writes that 'Many critics [...] have over-emphasized the influence of Joyce', using a quote from William Griffiths' short memoir of Thomas, which appears in the 'Memorial Issue of Adam International Review' (No. 238), as proof of his assumption:

Asked how he came to name his 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog' and whether he had been influenced by James Joyce, [Thomas] explained very quietly but with firmness that when he wrote the stories that comprise the volume, he had not read a word of Joyce.<sup>57</sup>

The anecdote could indeed be read as Thomas admitting to an oversight in his choice of reading material, however it could also be read, with equal assurance, as sarcasm, irony, diffidence or, moreover, as a joke, yet Ackerman takes this as unequivocal, first-hand

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<sup>54</sup> Introduction to Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. xiii.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. xiii.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas, however, pre-emptively underplayed such a comparison, asserting that:

I cannot say that I have been 'influenced' by Joyce, whom I enormously admire and whose *Ulysses*, and earlier stories I have read a great deal...On the other hand, I cannot deny that the shaping of some of my "Portrait" stories might owe something to Joyce's stories in the volume "Dubliners."

See Dylan Thomas, 'Notes on the Art of Poetry', *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. by James Scully (Glasgow: Collins, 1977), 195-202 (p. 198-199).

<sup>57</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 104.

testimony in support of his slight against the '[m]any critics'<sup>58</sup> who detected Joyce's influence. Indeed, Thomas, with characteristic contradictoriness, deflects his supposed ignorance of Joyce's works in a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson, dated 25<sup>th</sup> December 1933, in which he writes 'I have [...] most of Joyce, with the exception of *Ulysses*'.<sup>59</sup> This letter, published in both FitzGibbon's *Selected Letters* (1966) and Ferris's *Collected Letters* (first published in 1985) would suggest that Thomas had not only read Joyce, but owned the greater part of his output. Neither case can be proven with any sense of definitiveness.

Walford Davies is far less inclined to this kind of absolutism. On *Under Milk Wood*, we have Ackerman declaring:

Undoubtedly, the comedy stems from Thomas' acute but compassionate observation of the habits and foibles of the Welsh scene [...] those idiosyncrasies and deeply rooted habits of thought and feeling that are the raw material of his vision of Welsh life.<sup>60</sup>

Davies, on the other hand, finds good reason to caution against hasty generalisation, suggesting that '[i]n describing *Under Milk Wood*'s wonderful comedy, our language often needs to be dual, to fall between light and shade'<sup>61</sup>. Furthermore, we are asked to 'remember that the play's period of gestation was Thomas's whole career, and that the hinterland of poetry, prose, film and broadcasts from which the play emerged was often a dark one'.<sup>62</sup> It is apparent from this example that Davies' reading of *Under Milk Wood*, taking in not only the poetry but also the 'prose, film and broadcasts', is more sophisticated than Ackerman's, who cannot see past the 'idiosyncrasies' and 'foibles' of the characters (presumed, somewhat uncritically, to be quintessentially Welsh), and, by doing so, presents a far less appealing case for hunting out a recording of the play than Davies does with his dark hinterland to draw from. It is also one of

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<sup>58</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 104.

<sup>59</sup> *Selected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Constantine FitzGibbon (London: Dent, 1966), p.78 and *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 93.

<sup>60</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 171.

<sup>61</sup> Introduction to Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. xii.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. xiii.

the first examples of the 'prose, film and broadcasts' being used as a way of critically approaching Thomas's major works.

Vernon Watkins could rightly be viewed as an archetypal early critic of Thomas, mixing biographical detail, anecdote, assumption, personal agenda and loyalty with textual analysis, methodological critique, and an understanding of the style and literary, sociological and national ancestry of Thomas. One of the biggest problems facing Watkins, Ackerman and, to a lesser extent, Treece and Davies, was that Thomas was an endearing individual who incurred the wrath of some of the literary world's more imposing figures. This seems to have had the effect of shifting debate away from his works in and of themselves, onto how these works either serve to reinforce or, conversely, atone for what a twenty-year-old Thomas called a life spent living up to 'the dead *littérateurs* who put their coins in the plate of a procuring Muse, entered at the brothel doors of a divine language, and whored the syllables of Milton and the Bible'.<sup>63</sup>

Criticism of Thomas has often portrayed him as naïve and socially detached, as a *bon vivant* and *enfant terrible*, as a libidinous poet who was artistically inclined (fittingly pre-disposed, even) to die young. He has been portrayed as the quintessential poet, and an obscure one at that. He was famous, well-liked, at first fiercely defended, before being scorned and derided, and only relatively recently, with the range of his works under consideration being expanded and studied with our 'elementary critical faculties' largely intact,<sup>64</sup> has he been considered differently. The change that has occurred with the publication of the film scripts is significant in that the scripts do not fit into the bracket of obscurity to which those who would wish to accuse Thomas of moral untidiness usually turn. Rather, the film scripts and the

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<sup>63</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p.112.

<sup>64</sup> 'From a historical point of view, the overkill found in Holbrook and others is a reminder that they belong to a tradition of literary-critical moral panics that includes *The Edinburgh Review* assault on Keats, Buchanan's on the 'Fleshly School' and those on Sylvia Plath. Whatever else, it was clear that Thomas's work possessed the power to temporarily deprive commentators of the most elementary critical faculties'. (John Goodby, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013, p. 14).

broadcasts have given us various reasons to look again at the role politics (theoretical and historical) played in his creative process, to examine how politics interacted with the metaphysical and the romantic elements of his work that have been studied before, and to separate out Thomas's poetic and prose works to see where the influence of his political beliefs are most clearly expressed. This research seeks, therefore, to take the often-repeated praise of Thomas's love for humanity and examine it critically in relation to his prose works, in particular where society is portrayed.

This will be done by assessing Thomas's prose and drama works broadly by medium: film scripts, then radio scripts, followed by short stories, and concluding with a detailed study of *Under Milk Wood*. There are numerous ways that one might critically assess the works – chronologically, for example, or by publisher or producer, or by theme (propaganda, autobiographical, informational) – however, each medium brings its own set of additional opportunities for study, such as the detailed direction notes that Thomas included alongside the dialogue in *The Doctor and the Devils*. There are also important historical points relating to the publication and performance of the works, especially where the propaganda films are concerned, and this approach is therefore the most fitting. Many of the techniques developed by Thomas during the writing of his scripts and short stories, as well as the political thought which informed the works, find a place in *Under Milk Wood*, and it is for this reason that it will be examined in a standalone chapter.

The methodology I shall adopt for analysing Thomas's politics will not rely too heavily on literary or political theory. Rather, I shall emphasise the primacy of the written works themselves, and my approach will be one firmly based in close readings of the available texts and secondary sources, essentially allowing Thomas's style to inform that of the research. This seems the most appropriate way to write about Thomas, who despite being knowledgeable of political and literary theories (as the earlier correspondence in particular suggests), never

adopted what one might call an academic tone himself, either in his fiction or his commentaries on other writers. I believe, therefore, that this approach will balance well with the subject matter at hand.

## 1. THE FILM SCRIPTS

In 1930, as a fifteen-year-old with little interest in any subject at school except English, Dylan Thomas wrote an article entitled 'The Films' for the *Swansea Grammar School Magazine*. His article, brief as it is, reveals Thomas's interest in, and esteem for, the development of filmmaking in the twentieth century, 'not as freak exhibitions, but as works of art produced through an entirely new medium'.<sup>65</sup> This admiration would prompt Thomas to pepper his own works with persons and images drawn from this new medium, be it an oblique reference to Dali and Buñuel's surrealist *tour de force*, *Un Chien Andalou* in 'I, in my intricate image',<sup>66</sup> to the following, from 'Our Eunuch Dreams' (1934):

In this our age the gunman and his moll,  
Two one-dimensioned ghosts, love on a reel,  
Strange to our solid eye,  
And speak their midnight nothings as they swell;  
When cameras shut they hurry to their hole  
Down in the yard of day.

They dance between their arclamps and our skull,  
Impose their shots, throwing the nights away;  
We watch the show of shadows kiss or kill,  
Flavoured of celluloid give love the lie.<sup>67</sup>

Here we see Thomas drawing parallels between the unreal yet realistic world of cinema and the equally illusory world of dreams, likening the reductive portraiture of popular film (the 'one-dimensioned ghosts' who 'speak their midnight nothings') to the pointless fantasising of 'eunuch' (which is to say, simultaneously sexual and impotent) dreams. In the case of both there is a willingness to indulge in fantasy, to 'give love the lie' as Thomas puts it, and surrender to an escapism he calls 'the show of shadows' (recalling Chinese shadow puppetry)

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<sup>65</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writing*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. 87.

<sup>66</sup> '[...] Death instrumental, | Splitting the long eye open [...]' (Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 33).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

and, later on in the poem, ‘our two sleepings’. As Clerk Emery says, we live ‘in a double unreality [...] deluded by synthetic representations of the real’.<sup>68</sup> Be they romantic dreams or romantic movies, the effect (or rather lack of effect) is the same, and Thomas is keen for us to understand the impotency of these unreal existences so as to convince us of the need to recognise and reject the ‘synthetic’.

In a subtle reversal of the notion of an audience suspending their disbelief so as to indulge in fiction, Thomas writes in the penultimate stanza, ‘This is the world. Have faith’.<sup>69</sup> In other words, Thomas is asking his own audience for an almost sacred, devotional belief in the tangible, to trust in the real world that films might distract from. Indeed, in response to the opening of the third section, in which Thomas asks ‘Which is the world?’,<sup>70</sup> the penultimate stanza also begins with the words ‘This is the world’, emphasising with repetition the importance of his message and thereby clarifying his own ontological stance within the poem as it unfolds.

‘This is the world’ is followed by descriptions of our failings, such as ‘Our strips of stuff that tatter as we move | Loving and being loth’.<sup>71</sup> These failings – symbolised by Thomas as tattered clothes like stage costumes, and associated with antipathy rather than action – can be viewed as tests of the faith Thomas asks for at the conclusion of the stanza, the reward for ‘faith’ coming in the final few lines when he declares ‘We shall be fit fellows for a life, | And who remain shall flower as they love, | Praise to our faring hearts’.<sup>72</sup> The pragmatism invested in the phrase ‘fit fellows for a life’ implies that Thomas viewed the rejection of the ‘synthetic’ as an avowal that would ultimately improve the efficacy of an individual, improve his very ability to live, whilst the notion of flowering, especially ‘as they love’, implies a new found

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<sup>68</sup> Clerk Emery, *The World of Dylan Thomas* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. 110.

<sup>69</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

fertility in counterpoint to the ‘eunuch’ condition of dreaming or passively observing films. ‘Praise’ brings us back to faith, a faith that makes the hard work (‘faring’) of a real life possible.

The eunuch is the perfect embodiment of the desire to retreat into fantasy, representing a negation of reproductive potential whereby those who abandon the real world for that of ‘our two sleepings’ effectively castrate themselves by avoiding opportunities to interact with the society around them. Furthermore, the image of the eunuch also offers a personification of the verisimilitude of these other ‘worlds’ to the real, but are presented by Thomas as incomplete and uncomplicated by realistic, even complex, sexual desire. In the final stanza Thomas rails against this unreal, unnatural world with defiant word-play, where those who embrace the natural world ‘shall be a shouter like the cock’ and ‘fit fellows’ (i.e. not castrated), who will ‘smack | The image from the plates’. In imagining a violent rejection of cinema, Thomas belies an almost revolutionary distaste for it and a pronounced aversion to self-imposed isolation. Like so many before and after him, Thomas seems to be telling us to get out into the real world and not waste our time passively sat in front of screens.

‘Our Eunuch Dreams’ is, therefore, far from an unequivocal endorsement of the cinematic art, although it might be argued that Thomas’s reproach is directed specifically at Hollywood films, not the medium itself. In the 1930s, and despite government intervention (in the form of the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, which imposed quotas on the number of British films that should be screened), over seventy percent of films shown in Britain were imported from America, so it was perhaps inevitable that any criticism of popular, escapist cinema would be directed at an archetypically American genre such as the gangster film.<sup>73</sup> In correspondence written at the time of composing ‘Our Eunuch Dreams’ (March, 1934), it is evident that Thomas was aware of the potential for criticism that such technophilic, essentially

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<sup>73</sup> Paul Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926 – 1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 10.



avantgardist<sup>74</sup> tendencies might elicit when he responded to Pamela Hansford Johnson, ‘The poem you didn’t like [...] isn’t as bad as you think. There is no reason at all why I should not write of gunmen, cinemas & pylons if what I had to say necessitates it. Those words & images were essential [...] I wasn’t conceding anything’.<sup>75</sup> As if recalling the ‘fit fellows for a life’, Thomas emphasises the practicality of his approach in pragmatic terms (‘necessitates’, ‘essential’), thereby affirming that, although Hollywood films themselves may be useless, the use of filmic imagery in poetry is not.

One of Thomas’s most creative uses of cinematic imagery appears in the sonnet sequence ‘Altarwise by owl-light’ (1936). In the fifth sonnet, he re-imagines the Annunciation as a scene reminiscent of a saloon set piece from a classic Western (again, another quintessentially American trope). The Angel Gabriel is portrayed here not as a messenger from God, but as a cardsharp and a gunslinger:

And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel,  
From Jesu’s sleeve trumped up the king of spots,  
The sheath-decked jacks, queen with a shuffled heart;  
Said the fake gentleman in suit of spades,  
Black-tongued and tipsy from salvation’s bottle,  
Rose my Byzantine Adam in the night;<sup>76</sup>

The above has been dismissed as a rather adolescent, *épater le bourgeois* gesture in keeping with Thomas’s rebellious image (‘It is a young man’s attempt at blasphemy’, as Ackerman puts it),<sup>77</sup> however I would suggest that Thomas saw in the genre-defining Westerns of the time an unambiguous, simplified morality compatible with tales from the Bible, a ‘moral “openness”’<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Andrew Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. viii: ‘[...] the historical avantgarde aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture and thus should be distinguished from modernism, which for the most part insisted on the inherent hostility between high and low. Such a distinction is not meant to account for each and every individual case [...]’.

<sup>75</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 132.

<sup>76</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 60.

<sup>77</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Works* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 63.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Warshow, ‘Movie Chronicle: The Westerner’ in *Film Theory and Criticism (Sixth Edition)*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 705.

as Warshow noted of the style. If we consider Thomas's choice of motif as indicative of such an understanding, then what might be seen as sexual references ('two-gunned Gabriel', 'sheath-decked', even 'Rose my Byzantine Adam') and the parallel drawn between alcohol and deliverance ('tipsy from salvation's bottle'), far from being designed to cause outrage, can instead be read as typical of the manner, or 'openness', of the Western film. One might argue, therefore, that what we see in 'Altarwise by owl-light' is an attempt by Thomas to relocate the central message of the Annunciation to a contemporary setting, if not for solely artistic or experimental reasons, then perhaps to imply an enduring interest or relevance in the tale (rather than being an uncharacteristic example of childish profanity on the part of Thomas). At the very least, it displays an ease and familiarity with the iconography of popular film and Thomas's willingness to engage with it, as well as his interest in combining such emerging tropes with religious and other ideas (he cites Rip Van Winkle in the third section, for example).

Thomas's knowledge of cinema then, to which we might add his desire to stress the value of the real world over and against the fictional, would have provided a sound grounding for documentary scriptwriting. The transition, however, from poet to scriptwriter came about as a result of Thomas's wish to avoid any kind of perilous war work, such as manufacturing munitions (he had already been deemed unfit for military service on health grounds).<sup>79</sup> An introduction in 1941 by the American film director Ivan Moffat to Donald Taylor, whose Strand Film Company made documentaries for the Ministry of Information, was therefore both timely and welcome. Thomas was hired as a scriptwriter and put on £8 per week. As Tremlett says, 'Taylor needed scriptwriters. Thomas needed work. Moffat introduced them [...] Now, Dylan Thomas was safe from having to go to war, or even getting his hands dirty'.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography (New Edition)* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 191.

<sup>80</sup> George Tremlett, *Dylan Thomas: In the Mercy of his Means* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1992), p. 92.

Of course, Thomas was neither the first nor the only writer to put their authorial talents to use during wartime in the first half of the twentieth century. Propagandistic saturation of all forms of media, from the arts and social sciences to newspapers and popular cinema, was directed from Wellington House, the quasi-official name given to the War Propaganda Bureau, established at the beginning of the First World War. Intellectuals and writers such as Barrie, Chesterton, Conan Doyle, Galsworthy, Wells, Kipling, Ford, Buchan, Belloc, Trevelyan and Conrad were all recruited by Wellington House, covertly publishing their works through established houses such as Oxford University Press and T. Fisher Unwin in order to garner support for the Great War. Deals were made with influential journalists and editors in exchange for minimal censorship, whilst later on newspaper owners themselves (notably Lord Northcliffe and Lord Beaverbrook) were given key roles in government under Lloyd George.<sup>81</sup> Films were produced, such as *Britain Prepared*, which were shown at the front line with mobile cinemas. As Wollaeger observes, ‘a shared commitment to plying the British perspective through as many media channels as possible [...] created the most effective propaganda machine the world had ever seen’.<sup>82</sup> By the Second World War, however, this machine, rebranded as the Ministry of Information (MoI), would be roundly ridiculed for inefficiency and self-indulgence. Amongst the detractors were John Betjeman, who was employed by the MoI as a script-reader, and Evelyn Waugh, who satirised the institution in his novel *Put Out More Flags*.<sup>83</sup> Poorly judged poster campaigns, failings in the supply of information to the media, and a complete loss of public trust typified the Ministry at the beginning of the Second World War. A series of organisational restructurings, sackings, resignations (more often than not forced) and promotions slowly but surely improved the situation, especially in the Films

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<sup>81</sup> Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda* (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 14-18.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>83</sup> James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939 – 1945* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2000), pp. 13 – 15.

Division, and this was as much due to the influence of the film industry itself (in particular documentary filmmakers) as it was any acknowledgement of internal weaknesses or of governmental pressure.<sup>84</sup> Professional criticism, applied through the press and specialist trade journals such as *Documentary News Letter*, would eventually see the MoI commissioning films from industry specialists themselves (such as Taylor's Strand Film Company) rather than attempt to ply 'the British perspective' without professional assistance. Thomas himself tried to secure a position at the MoI, writing several letters to the then head of the Films Division, Sir Kenneth Clark, using his friendship with both Augustus John and Herbert Read to try to exert some influence. In the end, Clark was unable to find him a position, although correspondence from Thomas to Clark suggests Clark may have misconstrued Thomas's request, Thomas writing 'I quite understand that jobs can't be found – I wasn't asking for a bogus job; quite willing to work at almost anything – for every poet and painter and dancer [...] My great horror's killing'.<sup>85</sup>

Amongst the writers drawn into the morally ambiguous world of wartime propaganda were Julian Maclaren-Ross, who worked alongside Thomas at Strand, Louis MacNeice, George Orwell and William Empson, who were all employed by the BBC, as well as Cecil Day-Lewis, who held a post at the MoI.<sup>86</sup> For some, like Thomas, being involved in any way with British propaganda was a means of avoiding war work without declaring themselves as conscientious objectors. For others, like Orwell, it was a way of contributing to the war effort in spite of medical unfitness.<sup>87</sup> In either case, the resulting output seems to have been far from

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939 – 1945* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2000), pp. 19 – 30.

<sup>85</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), pp. 507– 508. Sir Kenneth Clark's wife, Lady Clark, did, however, write to Thomas after the event, suggesting he look into Cazalet's Battery. She also donated £10 to a fund for Thomas arranged by the founders of *Horizon*, amongst them Stephen Spender (*Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 513).

<sup>86</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), pp. 39– 40. Aside from this list, it seems likely that, like Thomas, many more writers may have been hopeful that their scriptwriting for the BBC would be sufficient to pass as valuable war work to the Ministry of Labour. (*Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 545).

<sup>87</sup> David John Taylor, *Orwell: The Life* (London: Vintage, 2004), pp. 272 – 273.

satisfactory. As Orwell himself put it, ‘all we are doing at present is useless, or slightly worse than useless’.<sup>88</sup> For Thomas, with all his horrors, the opportunity to do even this was reason enough to seize Taylor’s offer when it finally arrived.

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<sup>88</sup> David John Taylor, *Orwell: The Life* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 308.

## 1.1 The People's City

The first film script to be written by Thomas was 'This Is Colour'.<sup>89</sup> Produced by Strand Films in 1942, it was commissioned primarily to showcase the latest advances made in dye manufacturing and would, like later scripts that Thomas would be asked to write, be accompanied by a strict brief, having been commissioned by Imperial Chemical Industries (more commonly known by their acronym, ICI).<sup>90</sup> One reviewer of the film, writing for *Documentary News Letter*, commented that the 'treatment fortunately is academic, thus coordinating what might have easily turned out to be colour riot'.<sup>91</sup> This describes, in as succinct and polite a way as possible, the complete and striking lack of poetic language employed by Thomas. Indeed, where devices such as antimetabole are employed ('colour is light and light is colour', 'All dyes won't dye all materials'),<sup>92</sup> what might have easily turned out to be a rhetorical riot (or 'too neat poetry', as the reviewer puts it)<sup>93</sup> is kept in check by the cool pragmatism of the surrounding narration ('All colours come from the light of the sun' and 'This man is dyeing three separate hanks made up of natural silk, viscous rayon and acetate rayon, all widely used in everyday life' respectively – it is a far cry from 'Altarwise by owl-light').

I start with this fairly unremarkable work, however, not because of the poetic compromises that Thomas makes, but rather because it offers an early example of how Thomas expresses social concern in a way which neither contradicts nor distracts from a strict brief. The concluding section of the documentary begins, 'Without colour the new blocks of flats

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<sup>89</sup> A transcript of this film was produced by Ackerman as the original script has been lost. It is this which appears in his *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), and provides the material referenced here.

<sup>90</sup> As well as writing the script, Thomas also served as narrator alongside, amongst others, the appropriately named Valentine Dyall. (Andrew Sinclair, *Dylan The Bard* (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1999), p. 127).

<sup>91</sup> *Documentary News Letter*, May 1942, p. 71.

<sup>92</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 7 and p. 9 respectively.

<sup>93</sup> *Documentary News Letter*, May 1942, p. 71.

over our cities may all look alike, but with colour they become the separate places of people who can never be standardised'.<sup>94</sup> To viewers today, the overtly optimistic tone employed by Thomas to describe the almost self-contradicting image of collectivised individuality may appear ironic or, more likely, naive. Yet the drive for improved social housing was a pertinent concern for a country in the grips of a war and pitted with slum housing, which Thomas had already highlighted in one of the *Portrait of the Artist* stories, 'One Warm Saturday'. Indeed, the romantic, absolutist tenor of this closing statement ('people who can never be standardised') echoes the conclusion of 'One Warm Saturday', which eulogises 'the small and hardly known and never-to-be-forgotten people'<sup>95</sup> of Swansea, suggesting that Thomas's interest in social housing was not solely restricted to his propaganda works. To put this into some kind of historical perspective, on a national level the emphasis on reconstruction can be seen in the establishment of The Ministry of Town and Country Planning less than a year after 'This is Colour' was made, whilst an exhibition at the National Gallery called 'Rebuilding Britain' was also arranged, Sir William Beveridge (author of the *Beveridge Report ('Social Insurance and Allied Services', 1942))* contributing an impassioned call for reform of planning restrictions to the exhibition catalogue. Such reform would occur the very next year, with the Town and Country Planning Act.<sup>96</sup> The enthusiasm that Thomas shows for the reconstruction programme in 'This is Colour' needs to be considered in the context of this discernible, urgent drive for the (necessarily rapid) rebuilding of Britain, free of any lingering sense of hindsight or disapproval of concrete tower blocks (after all, this was the period of Le Corbusier and Niemeyer, when Futurism and Functionalism made reinforced concrete a material to be embraced not avoided). Given that the documentary covers some pretty dry subject matter, Thomas still manages to infuse it with a sense of political intent and concern for the people.

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<sup>94</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 9.

<sup>95</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 243.

<sup>96</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945 – 51* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2007), pp. 30 – 31.

Thomas was given the opportunity to be more plainspoken in ‘New Towns for Old’ (1942), a film designed to inform the public (in particular those living in low-rent council housing) of the development programmes temporarily put on hold by the Second World War. In a similar fashion to *Under Milk Wood*, the main drive of the narrative is provided by two voices, one a City Councillor called Jack Clem, the other an unnamed visitor, who make their way from the slums of the fictional Northern town of Smokedale to the newly developed housing estates, built away from factories and the pollution they create.<sup>97</sup> Thomas establishes the general tone of the film in the opening exchange between the councillor and the visitor, with the former inviting us into his town:

CITY COUNCILLOR: Now this is Smokedale. Half a million people live there – down at ‘Deep. (*noises of heavy industry*) Let’s take another look. Let’s see how folk live there. Don’t forget there’s folk still living like this in most other big towns. (*sounds of children playing, Councillor pointing towards them*) There! Look at that! That’s wrong!<sup>98</sup>

What the councillor draws the visitor’s (as well as the viewer’s) attention to are children ‘grow[ing] up in soot and muck’. ‘It isn’t right! What can they hope for? What can they look for’ard to?’<sup>99</sup> he asks, widening his criticism to include, not just the physical well-being of the children, but their psychological welfare too. Hope could be considered the central motif of ‘New Towns for Old’, as it is hope for the future to which Jack Clem turns at the close of film, when he is asked by the visitor to identify who, exactly, will carry on the rebuilding work so abruptly hindered by war. His answer, turning to camera, is ‘They are! You are! [...] You’re the only folk that can make these plans come true’.<sup>100</sup>

Thomas’s ‘This is the world. Have faith.’ comes to mind, and the vigour of the closing address gives the film a strong impression of the need for all of society to intervene in the future

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<sup>97</sup> As with ‘This Is Colour’, the original script has been lost. As a result of this, the descriptions of the characters used here are taken from Ackerman’s transcript, although the name Jack Clem is used in the film.

<sup>98</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 11.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.



of their towns and cities, suggesting, for all the officialdom of the preceding montage (featuring town planners and architects pouring over blueprints), that it is the people themselves who drive forward social change and carry this hope for an improvement in their own living conditions, rather than their elected representatives. The juxtaposition of the fictional town with a plea to the real viewer (to the reality beyond the silver screen, as it were) emphasises this call to action and renders it more forceful by disrupting the spectator/spectacle relationship which the cinema-goer comes to expect, whilst simultaneously offering the kind of prescriptive message which the MoI would have demanded. It is a novel way of promoting direct action in local politics, recalling the iconic First World War recruitment posters depicting Lord Kitchener. The difference here, of course, is that this is a call for help to rebuild, not to destroy.

In 'A City Re-Born' (1944), Thomas again picks up the theme of urban regeneration, focusing once more on the social imperatives that lie behind it. The overriding principle of the film, repeated and reinforced by a diverse array of voices, is that of egalitarianism. This emphasis on equality, on a new order founded on parity, is expressed in the cool yet determined commentary that punctuates the film:

COMMENTATOR: Coventry is going to be a place to live in where people can believe how pleasant human life can be ...  
It must be, not every man for himself, but every man for the good and the happiness of all people living ... Every man must believe in the good and happiness that is to be shared ... to be shared, equally.<sup>101</sup>

Ackerman, in his introduction to the transcript, notes that '[t]here were objections to some sections of the film which had the appearance 'of political propaganda'.<sup>102</sup> It is difficult to see how the above could be interpreted as anything but 'political propaganda'. In this new, egalitarian world, private welfare is superseded by the welfare of society, implying that the rebuilding of Coventry is more than just an architectural and engineering undertaking, that it

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<sup>101</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 95.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

could be the catalyst for a radical re-imagining of the very behaviour and belief-systems of society: in other words, '[...] a place to live in where people can believe how pleasant human life can be'.<sup>103</sup> The emphasis on re-birth is not, therefore, limited to the architectural rejuvenation of Coventry, but encompasses the social and psychological too, just as it had in 'New Towns for Old', and Thomas's words suggest that he appreciated that any response to the events in Coventry would necessitate an emotional, as well as practical, engagement.

It is not just the commentator whose lines possess a ring of socialism. During a chess game at a hostel for those left homeless by the bombings, one of the players comments, "They've got the proper idea in these places. Makes you think what a hell of a lot they can produce and make if it's for use and not for sale, doesn't it?"<sup>104</sup> Such a statement as this, pointing to the shortcomings of free market capitalism, alludes to (without specifically stating) the anti-capitalist strictures of the Left. The Communist Party of Great Britain at this time was thinking much the same as the chess player, and making those thoughts known to the wider society. Indeed, 'the party embraced the view that an objective basis existed for an alliance between 'progressive capital' and the Labour movement to carry through a 'state capitalist' reconstruction programme',<sup>105</sup> as it had become apparent, during the latter years of the Second World War, that trust in the party might be fostered and maintained by proving what a benefit centralised planning and regulated markets, administered under the aegis of trade union members, would be to the war effort. Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain at the time, summarised this positive, indeed positivist, approach as 'through confidence to power, rather than to power through disillusion'.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 95.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.

<sup>105</sup> James Hinton, 'The Communist Party, Production and Britain's Post-war Settlement' in *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of British Communism*, ed. by Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman and Kevin Morgan (London: Pluto Press, 1995), p. 162.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p. 163.

In 'A City Re-Born', an engineer, explaining to a group of sceptical locals the short-term benefits of prefabricated housing, remarks, 'THIS IS THE PEOPLE'S CITY [sic] or anyhow it's going to be',<sup>107</sup> insisting on the involvement of the local populace in defining the very conditions of their own social being. This idea is also posited in 'New Towns for Old', and emerges as the predominant theme in Thomas's film scripts on housing provision in the years following the war. In terms of the language used and the directness of Thomas's statements, the scripts provide a more radical angle on views expressed in his short stories, where his writing is driven less by politics and propaganda than in the film scripts. By viewing the war as a watershed that could (and should) bring about a new political process that not only focuses on, but actively involves, society as a whole, Thomas places Socialist beliefs at the very heart of Britain's planned regeneration, emphasising what can be achieved 'if it's for use and not for sale' whilst fulfilling, just as he had in 'This is Colour', a specific brief and, more importantly perhaps, getting these beliefs past the censors.

## 1.2 The Makers The Workers

Released in 1943, and again commissioned by the MoI, 'These Are The Men' uses footage from Leni Reifenstahl's 1934 film, *Triumph Des Willens* ('Triumph of the Will'). Over a montage sequence of speeches given by Adolf Hitler, Hermann Goering, Joseph Goebbels, Julius Streicher and Rudolf Hess, Thomas provides his own 'translation' of the original German. The synopsis for the film describes it as 'visually based [...] on imaginative re-use of Nazi propaganda', the spoof translations, which bear no resemblance at all to the original speeches, forming a series of mocking confessions by the orators, which one commentator

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<sup>107</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 92.

likened to the statements given by prisoners who had been given ‘notorious “confession drugs”’.<sup>108</sup> After a brief introduction, we are presented with Hitler’s ‘confession’:

HITLER: I was born of poor parents.  
I grew into a discontented and neurotic child.  
[...]  
I took up art.  
I gave up art because I was incompetent.  
I became a bricklayer’s labourer,  
A housepainter,  
A paperhanger,  
A peddler of pictures,  
A lance-corporal,  
A spy on socialists and communists,  
A hater of Jews and Trade Unions,  
A political prisoner,  
But my work was known.  
Patriotic industrial magnates financed me.  
Röhm and others supported me.  
Later I betrayed and murdered Röhm and the others.  
They had fulfilled their purpose.  
[...]  
Neurosis, charlatanism, bombast, anti-socialism,  
Hate of the Jews, treachery, murder, race-insanity.  
I am the Leader of the German People.<sup>109</sup>

The process here is dialectical, where ‘one image breeds another’<sup>110</sup> (as Thomas said of the process of writing poetry). In terms of the content and of the internal contradictions, it is beset by conflict: conflict with religious and political groups; with members of Hitler’s own party; and, indeed, an internal conflict driven by latent class anxieties (providing a somewhat ironic Marxist critique of the dictator’s psychological state). This dialectical process comes to a form of resolution in the phrase ‘But my work was known’, as Hitler abandons art owing to incompetency, but, through his hatred, has his ‘work’ as a political agent acknowledged. The very definition of ‘work’, therefore, is shifted, such that Hitler’s actions fulfil a central conceit: that of a need for recognition, even fame. Thomas presents this drive to resolution – which is, in itself, a drive away from Hitler’s birth ‘to poor parents’ – as integral to his political

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<sup>108</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 38.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407.

development, interweaving Hitler's private discontent and neurosis with his very public persecution of others. Hitler says, 'Later I betrayed and murdered Röhm and the others. They had fulfilled their purpose', thereby imbuing Hitler with a sense of callous, *petite bourgeois* self-determination, desperate to overcome his condition as 'a discontented and neurotic child' and to be 'known'. Indeed, the way in which Thomas proceeds through Hitler's *curriculum vitae* hints at what we might nowadays call climbing the ladder, moving opportunistically and determinedly through varying politicised states towards the legitimisation of official acknowledgement: 'spy on socialists and communists', 'hater of Jews and Trade Unions', and finally a 'political prisoner' and, therefore, part of the political system.

Hitler's discontent, meanwhile, is seen in the staccato inventory of jobs, breathlessly recounted in an almost irritable alliterative string ('A housepainter, | A paperhanger, | A peddler of pictures'), breaking at the point Hitler finds himself in the army. From here, Thomas develops Hitler's neurosis, which he evokes in terms of inert paranoia (i.e. spying and hating). The phrase 'political prisoner', when read alongside these comments, reveals a meaning distinct from a straightforward reference to the nine months Hitler spent in prison following his failed 'Beer Hall' putsch of 1923. It suggests an imprisonment of the individual will rather than the 'triumph' that Reifenstahl imagined, where hatred and fear (especially when politicised, as they are here) become chains of their own, underlining, not dispelling, the deficiencies of the orator. Hitler's mock confession is, therefore, both propaganda and critique of propaganda, turning the perlocutionary theatre of Reifenstahl's film against itself and questioning the very motivation behind Hitler's 'bombast'.<sup>111</sup> Viewed in this distorted context,

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<sup>111</sup> Indeed, there is, moreover, an hysterical quality that is generated by the almost Surrealist act of turning propaganda against itself, as if Thomas and the filmmakers intended to create an Escher-like infinite loop of self-referential doubt and neurosis. It shares, perhaps, qualities seen in the Appropriation Art of Andy Warhol (amongst others), however it can also be seen in the more recent works of Wang Guangyi, who takes images from Chinese propaganda and combines them with corporate logos so as to explore the changing culture of China. What is interesting here is that there is more to 'These Are the Men' than the simple act of creating propaganda, that it attempts to critique the fundamental qualities of propaganda, to reveal the hidden motivations beneath the message – to use propaganda to subvert itself.

Reifenstahl's crowds appear almost hallucinatory, symptomatic of Hitler's neurosis and denial, as little more than confirmatory voices in the dictator's head.

This theme continues through many of the speeches that Thomas satirises, building up a generalised notion that hatred of others, of anti-socialism in its purest sense, results in incapacitating inertia and neurosis. For example, Goebbels explains:

After Heidelberg University, I became a writer of plays,  
a poet, a journalist. None of my work was accepted.  
And this was because the editors were *Jews* [sic].  
Unemployed, Jew-hating, crippled, frustrated and bitter,  
I joined the Nazi Party.<sup>112</sup>

The parallels with Hitler's story confirm a common thread of paranoia, denial and discontent, although again Thomas stresses the effect on the individual of indulging in irrational hatred ('crippled, frustrated and bitter'). Hess, whose famous flight to Scotland to broker peace in 1941 had so spectacularly backfired, describes himself as 'a reactionary, anti-Jewish ex-officer, restless [and] discontented'. Like Hitler, he declares himself 'a prisoner'.<sup>113</sup> Julius Streicher, party propagandist and the voice of Nazi intolerance throughout the war, is treated with even greater disdain by Thomas, his entire being reduced to 'I am Streicher, a lover of animals, a torturer and murderer of Jews'.<sup>114</sup> By conveying so little biography on Streicher, Thomas (quite apart from delivering a Dantesque form of justice on his German counterpart) highlights the crudity of Streicher's mentality, as well as the reductive nature of his existence and of his occupation as mouth-piece for the Nazi Party. Repeatedly, then, we see the 'triumph' of any will cast in doubt. The will of these men seems crippled and riddled with neurosis.

Goering, who describes himself as 'a normal man: Twice married, twice mad', concludes his own monologue with the clarion call 'Gangsterism [sic], brute force, wealth for

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<sup>112</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 42.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

the few, cocaine and murder'.<sup>115</sup> The phrase 'wealth for the few' harks back to Hitler's own boast that 'Patriotic industrial magnates financed me' and provides an economic dimension to the argument against Fascism. Indeed, repeated references to the politico-economic foundations of the Nazi Party show Thomas distancing the Nazis, as far as the script will allow, from any form of liberal socialism, the former backed by anonymous profiteers, the latter exemplified by hard work and cooperation. Hitler, for example, is 'a hater [...] of Trade Unions'; Goebbels declares 'that the | Liberty of the Press was one of the greatest abuses of | Democracy'<sup>116</sup>; Goering's 'wealth for the few, cocaine and murder' typify a decidedly privileged (as well as noticeably psychotic) attitude. They are, in short, portrayed as free-marketeers, concerned more with profit than with the people.

This emphasis on private wealth, combined with Hitler's declared hatred of trade unions, finds a response in the anonymous voice that opens and closes the film. Thomas's editorial notes describe the visuals that accompany the opening of the film, in which this voice is introduced:

From a height we look down on to men baking bread, men going about their work quietly and efficiently, men of no particular nationality, just working men. We see them in the bakery, in the fields at harvest time, on the dock side, on a trawler, in an iron foundry.<sup>117</sup>

A voice then asks, '*Who are we?*', answering:

[...] We are the makers the workers the bakers  
Making and baking bread all over the earth in every town and village [...]  
Through war and pestilence and earthquake  
Baking the bread to feed the hunger of history.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 42.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

This vision of peaceful, almost contemplative production, set against a backdrop of ‘war and pestilence and earthquake’, is highly idealised whilst also approaching the biblically apocalyptic. Yet it epitomises the struggle of a unified society with the self-determination of Fascism, and the ruthless economic effects of war personified by Thomas as ‘the hunger of history’. There is an unconcealed internationalism in Thomas’s description of the workers, who are ‘men of no particular nationality’ and who ‘bake bread all over the earth’, which stands in contrast to Hitler’s own ‘race-insanity’ and even the ‘Patriotic industrial magnates’ that back him. The workers’ anonymity, their apparent egalitarianism, is, furthermore, antithetical to the self-serving drive of the Nazis, who act only for themselves:

*We dig the soil and the rock, we plough the land and the sea,  
So that all men may eat and be warm under the common sun.*<sup>119</sup>

The simple bucolicism and spirit of equality that are expressed in this statement point quite clearly to an egalitarian politics, one founded on equality and cooperation, ideas alien to the satirised Nazis portrayed here. In contrast to the passive neurosis of the Nazi leaders, ‘the workers’ are characterised by their desire to act. On several occasions, Thomas describes the working population in terms of what they do: ‘We are the makers the workers the bakers | Making and baking [...]’ and ‘We are the makers the workers the farmers the sailors | The tailors the carpenters the colliers the fishermen’,<sup>120</sup> each time listing them in an unpunctuated string, foreshadowing Hitler’s own list of failed professions reproduced above. The descriptions of the workers flow from identity into purpose, from character into occupation, and from person into place, thereby enhancing the sense of harmony, of continuity, acceptance, even contentment. This gives way, however, when war interrupts their working lives, and they become:

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<sup>119</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 40.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*



[T]he makers the workers the wounded the dying the dead  
The blind the frostbitten the burned the legless the mad  
Sons of the earth who are fighting and hating and killing now  
[...]  
We are the makers the workers the starving the slaves  
In Greece and China and Poland, digging our own graves.<sup>121</sup>

Descriptions tail off into inertia, the workers are ‘the dying the dead’, ‘the starving the slaves’, and what once was ‘ploughing the earth’ is corrupted and becomes the digging of graves. Similarly, proletarian internationalism is replaced by global warfare, leading the voice to ask, ‘Who set us at the throats of our comrades? [...] What men set man against man?’<sup>122</sup> which leads us into the first of the Nazi monologues. The shift from activity to passivity, from agent to subject, from ‘the makers the workers the farmers’ to ‘the blind the frostbitten the burned’, again suggests the enfeebling effects of conflict, where a latent desire to create, personified in the ‘Sons of the earth’, is in effect vitiated, counteracted and negated by war.

Throughout the film, Thomas is keen to stress that, in taking a stance antithetical to socialism in its broadest sense, each of the Nazi leaders (presented before us one at a time as the *individuals* responsible for the Second World War) risks absolute and incapacitating isolation. Hitler announces his neurosis, Goebbels describes himself as ‘Jew-hating, crippled, frustrated and bitter’, Goering declares himself ‘Twice married, twice mad’, Streicher reduces his identity to a single sentence, whilst Hess laments his imprisonment following his flight to Britain, admitting ‘I was wrong I am a prisoner’. The disparity between these lonely, ‘discontented’ testimonies and the descriptions of the workers is stark to say the least, even when we consider the disruptive effects of the war when the workers are ‘at the throats’ of their ‘comrades’. Even in this, a sense of unity persists in spite of tragic division.

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<sup>121</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 40.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

The film ends with a predictable condemnation of the Nazi leadership, as well as hope again for the future. According to Thomas, the film should fade from images ‘of masses of crosses over the graves of German soldiers’ into ‘the faces of [German] youths and young boys’, the narrator concluding:

Some of the young men, not utterly scarred and poisoned,  
Who have grown into manhood out of a school of horror,  
May yet be our comrades and brothers, workers and makers,  
After the agony of the world at war is over.<sup>123</sup>

The end of the war is imagined by Thomas as a move back to an inclusive, unifying proletarian internationalism, one couched in the language of the Left. ‘These Are The Men’ is just one example of where Thomas writes with a clear, left-wing ideology, displaying an acute awareness of both the personal and the societal implications of sacrificing social welfare for personal gain.

### 1.3 A ‘grief-fed’ Country

‘New Towns For Old’ and ‘A City Re-Born’, as well as other films written by Thomas at this time (such as ‘Balloon Site 568’, ‘Young Farmers’ and ‘Conquest of a Germ’) employ a mix of commentary and character dialogue to drive the narrative and impart a central propagandistic message. This overtly prescriptive method could not be further from the more familiar Thomas voice, a voice reliant upon multiple meanings and a diverse, diffuse handling of language. In ‘Our Country’, however, a film written in 1944 and intended for distribution in the USSR,<sup>124</sup> the more familiar Thomas voice is evident. Described by a reviewer for *Spectator* magazine as ‘the most exciting and provocative film [...] for many a long day’<sup>125</sup> the script has more in common with Thomas’s verse works than any of his other film scripts from this period,

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<sup>123</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), pp. 43 – 44.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

and has, as a result, been compared to many of the poems Thomas wrote at this time,<sup>126</sup> sharing as it does common themes, vernacular and imagery. The film script, which follows a merchant seaman, home for a period on shore leave, begins:

GLASGOW

To begin with  
a city  
a fair grey day  
a day as lively and noisy as a close gossip of sparrows  
as terribly impersonal as a sea cavern full of machines  
when morning is driving down from the roofs of buildings  
into stone labyrinths and traffic webs  
when each man is alone forever in the midst of the masses  
of men<sup>127</sup>

A clear comparison can be drawn with the opening of *Under Milk Wood* ('To begin at the beginning'),<sup>128</sup> however we can see from the script for 'Our Country' that Thomas had already developed the technique he would use to such great effect in the opening of his play for voices some seven years before he would definitively commence work on *Under Milk Wood*. The introduction, which evokes both a sense of the language of Genesis ('In the beginning,' etc.), as well as the drawing back of a theatre curtain, is inclusive, as if Thomas were inviting the audience to peer into a scene from a shared perspective. It also recalls the opening of fairy tales, suggesting a formal and innocent kind of storytelling. The scene itself, reminiscent of Eliot's London in *The Waste Land*, is however laden with the agitation of modern life: it is 'terribly impersonal', the morning is 'driving down from the roofs of buildings' and people go about 'alone forever in the midst of masses | of men'. From the urban sprawl of rush-hour Glasgow, the scene moves on to London and 'the separate movements of the morning crowds' which, being disconnected, 'are lost together in the heartbeats of clocks',<sup>129</sup> thereby reinforcing

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<sup>126</sup> See, for example, *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), pp. 65-67, and Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), p. 207.

<sup>127</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 67.

<sup>128</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>129</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 67.

the mechanical theme established in the 'sea cavern full of machines'. It is easy to read in the 'stone labyrinths' and the 'traffic webs' an alienation from the natural world. Thomas describes the 'fair grey day' we are introduced to as:

a day when the long noise of the sea is forgotten  
street-drowned in another memory  
of the sound itself of smoke and sailing dust [...] <sup>130</sup>

Thomas's compound adjective 'street-drowned' points towards both the drowning out of the 'long noise of the sea' as well as the habitual surrender to 'another memory' given shortly after, and not only asserts this alienation as one shrouded in substitution ('another memory of the sound itself'), but as a corrupted representation of nature. Similarly, 'the always to be remembered [...] sea music' <sup>131</sup> is replaced with 'trumpets of traffic signs', 'rasp of the red and green signal lights', 'the owl sound of the dry wind in the tube tunnels' and 'the blare and ragged drumroll of the armies of pavements and chimneys'. <sup>132</sup> This method of corruption and substitution is itself disrupted, however, by the image of St. Paul's Cathedral, a famous victim of the blitz. Thomas writes:

There is peace under one roof.  
  
And then birds flying  
Suddenly easily as though from another country. <sup>133</sup>

This other country is the countryside itself, as we discover in the subsequent descriptions of harvest time, country roads, village markets, the Welsh mountains, and the Highlands of Scotland. What Thomas describes is a Britain steeped in the traditions of the countryside, moved by the seasons and reliant upon nature: 'They come like a holiday every year | they come to work in the fields | and catch again the flying open Summer in their hands and eyes'. <sup>134</sup> This scene, titled 'The Harvest', takes us away from what Thomas calls 'the ten million-headed

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<sup>130</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 67.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

city' of London<sup>135</sup> and out into the more peaceful countryside, even if it too is compromised by war: 'A man may see on the roads he rides | Summer and war on all four fair sides'.<sup>136</sup>

By adopting the language and imagery of pastoral poetry, Thomas evokes a land quite different to the one typified by scenes of bombed streets and 'all the separate movements of the morning crowds'. This other view of Britain is beautiful, harmonious, typified by 'orchard and cottage cluster | the drinking trough in the market square | and the lovers' lanes'.<sup>137</sup> The 'terribly impersonal' cities, which we see at the beginning, are displaced in favour of 'the country's strangely singing names'.<sup>138</sup> However, so as not to 'spoon-feed [a generation] with a propaganda that reeks of the death of culture and drips with the milk and honey of curdled patriotism' (as Thomas had written of the tactics of the British Union of Fascists before the war and before he himself became a salaried propropagandist),<sup>139</sup> this quiet bucolicism is interrupted by 'the valley's voice' of Wales:

The voice of the pick in the hand hewn seam  
the hunger born pit boy and blind pony  
denial of defeat  
the grief-fed country's furnace  
the fire in men [...]<sup>140</sup>

The phrase 'hunger born' contrasts vividly with the preceding images of harvest time and village markets, suggesting a problem quite removed from war. It is indicative, rather, of simple economic inequality and the scourge of the Great Depression. War, as Thomas is at pains to point out, merely exacerbated this problem, juxtaposing the starving child with 'the grief-fed country's furnace', Wales. As Paananen asserts, '[s]uch lives are over before they are

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<sup>135</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 68.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid* p. 69.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>139</sup> Letter to *Swansea Guardian*, reprinted in Victor Golightly, "'Writing with dreams and blood": Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea' in Tony Brown (ed.), *Welsh Writing in English, Volume 8*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003, p.78.

<sup>140</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 71.

begun' having 'been denied the opportunity for free creative labour'.<sup>141</sup> This idea, seen elsewhere in the film scripts, was expressed in harsher terms by Thomas a decade earlier in a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson:

An economic system (he barked) must have an ethical sanction [...] Industry is capable of giving the community a high standard of living and it is only a faulty monetary system which prevents industry from delivering the goods [...] What is required is not a bloody revolution but an intellectual one.<sup>142</sup>

Despite Thomas's self-effacing 'he barked', the evident lack of an ethically sanctioned economy is highlighted quite plainly in the 'hunger born pit boy'. There are echoes of this idea too in 'A City Re-Born', when the chess player remarks on 'what a hell of a lot they can produce and make if it's for use and not for sale' as discussed earlier.

Given Thomas's upbringing in South Wales, it is unsurprising that industry's inability to give 'the community a high standard of living' is exposed when the action turns to the area and a more familiar community (to Thomas, that is) being let down. The Depression, which blighted Wales in the inter-war period, had brought about the collapse of the South Wales mining industry and a soaring unemployment rate (between 1921 and 1936, for example, 241 coal mines were closed in this area and a mining workforce of 270,000 had been nearly halved),<sup>143</sup> a problem further exacerbated by a lower export demand for coal resulting from a global shift to oil.<sup>144</sup> Despite the relative sense of prosperity brought about by war work (offset in no small part by the exigencies of war itself),<sup>145</sup> memories of the devastating depression would still be potent in 1944.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Victor Paananen, 'The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 46-66 (p. 57).

<sup>142</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 185.

<sup>143</sup> M. Williams, "'In the Wars': Wales 1914 – 1945", in *The People of Wales*, ed. by Gareth Jones & Dai Smith (Ceredigion: Gomer Press, 2000), pp.188 – 189.

<sup>144</sup> Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, *Wales: A History* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1985), p. 247.

<sup>145</sup> M. Williams, "'In the Wars': Wales 1914 – 1945", in *The People of Wales*, ed. by Gareth Jones & Dai Smith (Ceredigion: Gomer Press, 2000), p. 203.

<sup>146</sup> 'No one who knew them in those dismal days will ever forget them: the long line of once-proud miners waiting outside the Labour Exchange for the dole, the women and children scrabbling for small pieces of coal on the tips

Thomas was all too aware of the effects of unemployment in this area, as well as in the rest of Wales, having written about it in another film, 'Wales: Green Mountain, Black Mountain', only two years earlier. After a brief introduction on the history of Wales, the film begins:

Morning is breaking over Wales at war [...] the terrible near war of  
England and Wales and her brothers and sisters all over the earth,  
against the men who would murder man.<sup>147</sup>

The parallels with 'These Are The Men' are obvious enough, however this ostensibly partisan view of a Wales united against a common aggressor gives way, much as 'Our Country' gives way, to the desperate plight of the communities reliant upon coal-mining: 'At the corners lolled the old-young men, or they walked their thin whippets over the dirty grass, or they scrabbled on the tips for fishfrails of coal'.<sup>148</sup> This is not the Wales that Thomas earlier describes as 'a mountain of strength',<sup>149</sup> but is rather one brought to its knees by poverty, a Wales 'barnacled with smoking chimneys, and clustered with bad streets'.<sup>150</sup> Thomas leaves the viewer in little doubt as to the deprivation, providing a twelve-line verse of six rhyming couplets in which he repeats and reinforces this view of a forsaken community.<sup>151</sup> As a result of his description of unemployment, the film was rejected by the British Council as unsuitable for viewing overseas, although it was eventually released and, rather unusually, accompanied by a Welsh-language version.<sup>152</sup> Thomas's desire to draw attention to economic issues quite apart from war may have made this film poor propaganda in the eyes of those wishing to paint all parts of Britain, including its 'furnace', as united. However, his insistence that 'out of the sickening, deadening

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in the winter rain [...] the general feeling of a whole community being thrown on the scrap heap and no one in authority caring. The Depression left a scar on south Wales that could never be effaced'. (Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, *Wales: A History* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1985), p. 248).

<sup>147</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 28.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

idleness must come the pride of Labour again’<sup>153</sup> would have received a warmer reception in the communities of his homeland, in particular Thomas’s claim that, after their contribution to the war effort, ‘the world shall never deny them again’.<sup>154</sup> As Davies notes: ‘Cases of mental illness also increased [during the Depression], for in losing his work a man was deprived not only of his income but also of the social context of his life; indeed, with the work ethic so strong in the coalfield, he could come to feel that his existence lacked any purpose.’<sup>155</sup>

Thomas’s rhetorical, militant stance is a far cry from the romanticised vision of Wales portrayed in ‘Fern Hill’ (1945). Yet ‘These Are the Men’, ‘Our Country’ and ‘Wales: Green Mountain, Black Mountain’ all share a common desire to proclaim the need for work and the nobility inherent in work, if there is a corresponding economical model to empower and respect the workers. Without these, a generation is wasted and further generations suffer, whilst with them unity, pride and hope are restored. To readers of Thomas’s poetry, the overtly left-wing language he employs in these scripts can seem uncharacteristic. However, Thomas’s attitude was that ‘Writers should keep their opinions for their prose’,<sup>156</sup> a principle we can see he clearly adhered to.

#### 1.4 ‘To them we speak a strange and foreign tongue’

Not all of Thomas’s films were overtly propagandistic in tone, nor delivered in the informative voice of a documentary or docudrama. *Rebecca’s Daughters*, written in 1948 and filmed some forty-three years later, is primarily a romantic period drama set against the

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<sup>153</sup> The capitalisation of the word ‘Labour’ is worth noting, implying as it does the Labour Party. A direct reference may not be as unlikely as it first seems, since Thomas would, a few years, later win three guineas for the remark, ‘One should tolerate the Labour government because running down Labour eventually brings you alongside the Conservatives, which is the last place you want to be’, which was printed in the I-n-s-u-l-t-s column of *Strand* magazine. This suggests, at the very least, a regard for the Labour Party, if not whole-hearted support (Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003), p. 274.)

<sup>154</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 31.

<sup>155</sup> John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, rev. ed. 2007), p. 563.

<sup>156</sup> *A Casebook on Dylan Thomas*, ed. by John Malcolm Brinnin (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1960), p. 196, quoted in *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 28.



backdrop of what Georg Lukács might call ‘the romanticism of illegality’,<sup>157</sup> namely the Rebecca Riots of the nineteenth century.<sup>158</sup> The story revolves around Anthony Raine, a seemingly diffident ex-Army Officer who returns to his native Pembrokeshire to find it being exploited by his wealthy peers, and who leads a bloodless rebellion (‘disguised in traditional Welsh woman’s costume’<sup>159</sup> and calling himself ‘Rebecca’) against the tollgates and the Turnpike Trust who profit from them. The other principle character is Rhiannon, herself wealthy, young and rebellious, and who is in love with the idea of the anonymous Rebecca but infuriated by Anthony. When Anthony is revealed as Rebecca, an easy transition of affection takes place and marriage is inevitable. The dialogue is largely amusing, the scenes of destruction mostly harmless, and the conclusion predictably happy. It is, to all intents and purposes, what we might call a ripping yarn. However, it is also playfully seditious, dramatising a critical period in modern Welsh history when the very culture of Wales was threatened by the homogenising influence of British imperialist economics and politics.

The tollgates which are attacked by Rebecca and his/her ‘daughters’ (local men also dressed as women) are, from the very beginning of the script, portrayed as a corrupt means of extracting money from the workers, people who have no other choice than to travel along these gated roads. Where gates already exist, further gates, we are told, are to be erected, and, despite the cost of passing through these gates routinely increasing, the roads themselves are neglected. The very notion of a Turnpike Trust, established in order to protect the infrastructural conditions required for the local community to earn a living, is therefore inverted, becoming a threat to the workers’ livelihoods instead. As Gwynfor Evans remarks:

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<sup>157</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin Press, 1990), p. 263.

<sup>158</sup> The year is established by Thomas as 1843, however the affected Turnpike Trust, Whitland, as well as the details of the riots, also suggest the events took place in 1839 (Gwynfor Evans, *Land of my Fathers* (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2008), p. 364). For details on the link between the Rebecca Rioters and the Chartist movement, see Gwnn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 194 – 197).

<sup>159</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Rebecca’s Daughters* (London: Grafton, 1992), p. 54.

No doubt the 'Turnpike Trust' method of maintaining roads had performed a valuable service during the previous hundred years, but, by now [1839], they were often ineffective and tyrannical. A way of 'farming' roads was developed, and toll-gates increased in number [...] When a farmer took his wagon or cart to fetch a load of lime from the kilns on the Mynydd Du (Black Mountain) he had to pay many times the value of the lime in tolls.<sup>160</sup>

This very problem of being forced to pay a fee in order to work is highlighted by Thomas in a court scene which centres on Rhodri Huws, one of the more militant characters of the film, who is charged with not paying the toll:

Rhodri states his case: 'My cart was empty. I took it to the quarry to get lime for my land. And I *paid* when I bought it back loaded. The tollgate has been put up near the quarry on purpose to catch us and make us pay twice. I refused *then*, and I refuse *for ever* [sic].'

[...]

'The exemption claimed by the defendant seems to be in respect of dung brought from town.'

'But lime is not dung!' points out a magistrate. Lord Sarn agrees: 'Very true, sir, very true!'

'In foreign countries it's allowed,' Rhodri tells him.

'Which foreign countries?'

'England.'

[...] Above the noise, Rhodri shouts to make himself heard. 'All our lives we pay. We pay you rents and make rates and you let us live in hovels and never mend the roads we use. We pay to live and we are always poor. We live to pay and keep *you* rich by our work. And now you put up toll-gates so that we have to pay to *work*.'

And the murmur of the court crowd rises. Lord Sarn bangs his hammer again, but this time the crowd will not be silenced.<sup>161</sup>

This scene, uncharacteristically direct in its polemic (in terms of the script, that is), touches on both the duplicitous levying of charges on the working classes by an already wealthy elite (exemplified by the positioning of the tollgate on a site where it would have to be passed through twice), as well as the antagonism resulting from a 'foreign' ruling class. With regard to the former point, Huws' insistence that the tollgate is part of the legitimated apparatus

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<sup>160</sup> Gwynfor Evans, *Land of my Fathers* (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2008), pp. 364-365.

<sup>161</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Rebecca's Daughters* (London: Grafton, 1992), pp. 36 – 37.

intended to subjugate the workers for the benefit of the rich<sup>162</sup> and that, furthermore, the very condition of poverty exposes individuals to exploitation (which serves only to exacerbate that poverty), is deeply anti-authoritarian and openly militant. The earnestness of his entreaty, made on behalf of not only himself, but of his community and, in a wider sense, the working class, is mischievously juxtaposed with the bumbling, disinterested behaviour of the magistrates, including Anthony, who throughout affects a casual indifference to the proceedings (indeed, when Huws objects to the presence of Anthony, ‘who makes money out of the tollgates’, Anthony’s response is one of relief at being spared his magisterial duties).<sup>163</sup>

Thomas places the emphasis of the proceedings, as far the magistrates see it, on the point at which they can fine the defendant (another way for the elite to make money), a finale delayed by Rhodri since, as the clerk informs us, ‘I am afraid he must be allowed to make his defence’, to which Lord Sarn responds ‘Of course, of course. And *then* I fine him. I rather like that part [...]’.<sup>164</sup>

The lackadaisical attitude adopted by the magistrates allows Thomas to satirise, and thereby critique, a system which was, in all reality, far harsher than he suggests. In rural areas, where knowledge amongst the local populace of the imposed English language was minimal (or entirely non-existent), cases would still be tried in English, ‘and this made the elaborate paraphernalia of the law appear to a bewildered peasantry to be a species of trickery, of chicanery, intended to deprive them of justice’.<sup>165</sup> Thomas’s undermining of the credibility of the court, as well as his parodying of the magistrates, clearly distinguishes the assumed authority of the court from the primacy of Huws’ cause. Put another way, Thomas reveals the

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<sup>162</sup> Several scenes earlier, and before he is aware of his own role in the Turnpike Trust, Anthony expresses this legitimisation, remarking ‘And the number of those legalised highwaymen! These official pick-pockets! There must be more tollgates than liars in the country’. (Dylan Thomas, *Rebecca’s Daughters* (London: Grafton, 1992), p. 13).

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, p. 35.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>165</sup> Gwynfor Evans, *Land of my Fathers* (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2008), p. 361.

senselessness of a biased provincial court system crippled by feudalism and an inherent conflict of interests through their obvious lack of fair judgement.

Huws' assertion, moreover, that England is a 'foreign' country can be viewed, in light of the above, as a form of resistance, against both the immutable prejudice of the legal system, and the apparent political and economic colonization (more specifically Anglicization) of Wales by a profit-driven elite. As Raymond Williams states:

Lines of communication, from the turnpikes to the new railways and canals, were driven through Wales on bearings determined by the shape of the larger economy and trading systems [...] Few of these were ever related to the internal needs of Wales, as a developing country, or (as the Rebecca rioters of 1843 recognized) to the customs and needs of the traditional rural economy.<sup>166</sup>

The inevitable results of such disregard for the local populace, its 'customs and needs', were resentment and, as the Rebecca Riots show, conflict. Anthony Raine encounters this resentment on his first trip through the land that he owns, when successive attempts at greeting the people who live in the houses that he is responsible for are met with silence or open contempt. 'Perhaps they're ungrateful enough not to like living in pig sties. Perhaps they don't like being bullied and cheated at every one of your tollgates',<sup>167</sup> remarks Rhiannon. The section concludes with Anthony coming across a particularly elderly tenant who has been stopped from herding his sheep back through a tollgate at St. Clears. It is worth noting that Anthony addresses him as 'William Evan *Dolcoed*',<sup>168</sup> giving him both his family name and a locational suffix, enhancing the sense of William Evan's place in the community and Anthony's own sensitivity to the importance of location as an historical and cultural referent. Indeed, the first attack on a tollgate by Anthony (as Rebecca) is against the one at St. Clears, thus underlining Anthony's sense of allegiance to the community.

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<sup>166</sup> Raymond Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*, ed. by Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Cardiff Press, 2008), p. 22.

<sup>167</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Rebecca's Daughters* (London: Grafton, 1992), pp. 24- 25.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28 (nb. The italics are Thomas's).

The conflict between rural Wales and a ‘foreign’ England is repeated in the sermon at Bethel Chapel, shortly after the courtroom drama mentioned above. The scene begins with Lord Sarn and his guests (amongst them Anthony, Rhiannon, and the pompous Captain Marsden) entering ‘the – er – *other* place of worship’, as Lord Sarn calls it,<sup>169</sup> to the sound of a Welsh hymn, as well as ‘surprised, disapproving and enquiring glances [...] turned in their direction’.<sup>170</sup> The reason they are there, we later discover, is to hear the sermon of the preacher, Mordecai Thomas, and to gather ‘evidence’ of the preacher’s ‘[s]heer sedition’, at the request of Captain Marsden.<sup>171</sup> It is quite clear that there is a deep and mutual sense of suspicion between the locals and the ruling elite, with the visit by Lord Sarn’s party the first of a series of actions by them to effectively spy on the working class inhabitants of the county (later on in the script they pay a local blacksmith to do this for them).<sup>172</sup> In response to their presence, Mordecai Thomas adopts a tone of barely restrained hostility, beginning his sermon, very much in the way that Rhodri Huws had augmented his defence, by highlighting the otherness of those identified as their oppressors, once again drawing on national identity as the key to this otherness. He says:

To-day, my friends, the preaching will be in English, and for this reason – there are strangers among us. Not strangers to our daily lives, but to this, our humble house. To them we speak a strange and foreign tongue.<sup>173</sup>

By implication, then, an axiological rift (both spiritual and economic), established here in the undeniable facts of differing nationhood and class, prefigures and, to an extent, justifies the partisan tenor of the preacher’s sermon. The subtle transfer of foreignness from the English to the Welsh (for Rhodri Huws England was a foreign country, whilst here Welsh is a ‘foreign tongue’) counterbalances the charge that it is a purely Welsh perception of the state of the two

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<sup>169</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Rebecca’s Daughters* (London: Grafton, 1992), p. 43.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73 – 74.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

nations, suggesting that the local, English land owners and magistrates view Wales as a foreign country as much as Rhodri Huws views England as one.

The sermon itself sets up one of the prevailing reasons for the name and the appearance of Rebecca and his/her daughters, namely that it is a reference to Genesis, chapter 24, from which the preacher reads: ‘And they blessed Rebecca and said unto her, “Thou art our sister. Be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess *the gate of those that hate them*.”’<sup>174</sup> This quotation leads on to an attack on the tollgates and a call for them to be destroyed, Mordecai Thomas stating that ‘it is very sure that the gates [of the biblical quotation] were an oppression and an abomination, as are the gates upon the roads of the land wherein we labour’.<sup>175</sup> His sermon concludes with the following:

‘[...] Where does the money go that is dragged out from our poverty? It is lost among the riches of the enemy at the gate. Let us pray for a deliverer that shall be raised up among us, so that the seed of Rebecca, Rebecca’s daughters, shall indeed possess the gates of her enemies and *lay them low!*’<sup>176</sup>

The sermon, therefore, conflates religion, tradition and militancy into a single, morally charged assault on the tollgate system, assigning a teleological impetus to the longing for freedom that is being preached. The rebellious figure of Mordecai Thomas, Ackerman notes, may have been inspired by Thomas’s grandfather’s brother, Gwilym Marles (William Thomas). Marles was a Unitarian minister, a poet, and local political figure, who ‘defend[ed] tenants against the local landowners’<sup>177</sup> and ‘wrote extensively as a radical, advocating social reform’.<sup>178</sup> As with most characters in *Rebecca’s Daughters*, Mordecai Thomas is both serious and comic, the overall picture of him coloured by sympathy. The comedic aspects, however, allow Thomas to vocalise ostensibly socialist ideas in a way which does not suggest that he himself is preaching,

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<sup>174</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Rebecca’s Daughters* (London: Grafton, 1992), p. 44 (nb. The italics are Thomas’s).

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46.

<sup>177</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 386.

<sup>178</sup> Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography (New Edition)* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 8.

offsetting socialist panegyric with slap-stick and one-liners. For example, Mordecai Thomas reveals to the local M.P. that he is one of Rebecca's daughters, and that '[t]he evil Rebecca fights against is the evil of selfish gain, and the tyranny of rich over poor',<sup>179</sup> echoing the words of the periodical *Seren Gomer* that claimed 'Beca is tyranny and poverty'.<sup>180</sup>

Much of the script is comedic, the characters parodic, the set pieces marked by humour. It would be a mistake, however, to think that Thomas was not committed to highlighting the very serious issue of poverty and the exploitation of the working class. Repeated references to deprivation, juxtaposed by Thomas with an incompetent, self-indulgent and corrupt landed gentry, offer a dramatised account of the fundamental conditions required for a revolt such as the Rebecca Riots. As the story progresses and the tollgate attacks increase, the response from the local authorities is to increase police presence and, later, to bring in the army, effectively escalating the level of violence in order to ultimately subdue it. The oppressive, reactionary nature of a threatened ruling elite is typified in Captain Marsden's remark, 'Rebecca – dead or alive [...] But you can forget the last word',<sup>181</sup> which stands in contrast to the non-violent instructions of Anthony/Rebecca that '[t]he gates must be destroyed [...] But there must be no bloodshed'.<sup>182</sup> The theme of revolution, moreover, is touched upon throughout the film script, Thomas alluding to the fact that such conditions might, if taken to their natural conclusion, result in such a social upheaval. For example, Huws claims that 'the Government [is] afraid of a Revolution [sic]',<sup>183</sup> whilst the Turnpike Trust, in turn, glibly dismiss the notion of 'revolution in the country' as an impossibility (this on the very day of the first Rebecca attack).<sup>184</sup> The growing popularity of, and support for, the Rebecca rioters is shown by the almost infectious nature of a ballad written about the rioters by an unknown local author. It is

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<sup>179</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Rebecca's Daughters* (London: Grafton, 1992), p. 67.

<sup>180</sup> Gwynfor Evans, *Land of my Fathers* (Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, 2008), p. 365.

<sup>181</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Rebecca's Daughters* (London: Grafton, 1992), p. 132.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

sung by rioters in the local pub, whistled by Mordecai Thomas and, finally, played on the piano by Rhiannon in her bedroom within the wealthy confines of Sarn Hall. The gradual incursion of this tune into numerous and disparate parts of the county suggests a galvanising effect of the Rebecca rioters, as people with different beliefs, backgrounds and occupations unite against a common oppressor. On the various forms of resistance experienced in Wales in the nineteenth century, Williams writes that:

[...] it is surprising that there was as much national feeling as there was: a common perception of identity, within such diverse situations and conflicts. That this identity was primarily cultural – in language, kinship and community – rather than in any modern sense political is, in this situation, not surprising at all.<sup>185</sup>

In *Rebecca's Daughters*, Thomas hints at both nationality and the 'primarily cultural' unity that the Rebecca riots inspired, a unity which ultimately brings about the destruction of the tollgates and which sees Lord Sarn (Rhiannon's uncle, a magistrate and one of the Turnpike trustees) ordering the disposal of Rebecca's clothing, thus putting an end to any hopes of apprehending him. Society in this instance is, therefore, portrayed as protective: those in a position to guard the poor from exploitation (and who are, more importantly, willing to use that influential position to help) are depicted as brave and benevolent, whilst those who are the victims of exploitation are shown as capable of coming together to take direct action against the architecture of their exploiters in an effective and ultimately revolutionary act of militancy instigated in order to free themselves from oppression.

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<sup>185</sup> Raymond Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*, ed. by Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Cardiff Press, 2008), p. 23.



## 1.5 The Death of a Class

George Bernard Shaw's claim that progress depends on the unreasonable man, that the *sine qua non* of advancement is an irrational belief in human potential and the stubborn refusal to relent to the tenets of received wisdom, is, in a roundabout way, the subject of *The Doctor and the Devils* (1953), a screenplay commissioned by Donald Taylor with the instruction that it interrogate the notion of 'the ends justifying the means'.<sup>186</sup> It is one of a number of works written by Thomas in response to works by others. In this case the *donnée* was James Bridie's play *The Anatomist* (1931),<sup>187</sup> but we could also count *The Beach of Falesá* (1964), originally by Robert Louis Stevenson (1892), *The Three Weird Sisters* (1948), based on a book by the American author Charlotte Armstrong (1943),<sup>188</sup> and *No Room at the Inn* (1948), which Thomas adapted from Joan Temple's play (1945) of the same name, as further examples.<sup>189</sup> Given the number of works Thomas was being asked to dissect, it is perhaps small wonder that his own fictionalised anatomist, Thomas Rock, should at times resemble a beleaguered poet.

Yet it is the figure of Rock – a character based none too loosely on the Edinburgh anatomist Dr. Robert Knox (the name 'Rock' is a portmanteau nod to this inspiration),<sup>190</sup> whose involvement with the infamous body-snatchers William Burke and William Hare meant his name would forever be associated with the latters' morbid occupation – who struggles with, even embodies, the issue of 'the ends justifying the means' in his capacity as a man of science and a man of learning. Indeed, he is its main exponent, as is evidenced by the first of many lectures we see Rock give at his academy:

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<sup>186</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 136.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 281.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>190</sup> Thomas wrote in a letter: 'I think I forgot to tell you the new name I had thought of for Dr. Robert Knox: *Thomas Rock*. This is very near, in vowels & general feeling, to the original [and] it does sound the name of a man who could be very distinguished & great in science'. (*Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 602.)

ROCK            [...]

For I believe that all men can be happy and that the good life can be led upon this earth.

I believe that all men must work towards that end.

*And I believe that that end justifies any means....* [sic]

*Let no scruples stand in the way of the progress of medical science!*<sup>191</sup>

True to the example of Knox, Rock also escapes his unashamed funding of murder for medical subjects with little more than a damaged reputation and the melodramatic, self-pitying neurosis of a latter-day Lady Macbeth (whilst his supplier, Robert Fallon is hanged, as was the real-life William Burke). He is able to do this because he is protected by the establishment, an establishment which is in turn keen to protect itself, unlike that of *Rebecca's Daughters*. As a colleague of Rock's puts it, 'Indictment of Rock would mean *the death of a class...* [sic]'.<sup>192</sup> *The Doctor and the Devils* is, therefore, more concerned with which of Shaw's unreasonable men are worthy of salvation (or perhaps salvage), a decision which is ultimately determined by socio-economic factors. To this extent, the film is about preservation, a point alluded to in the early scene in which Rock is appointed the new head of the Anatomical Academy, an appointment which is made in the Anatomical Museum amongst the preserved remains of the dead.<sup>193</sup>

Class is paramount in Thomas's film script. It is analogous to worth, which is in turn the analogue of the right to live, the right to be saved. Thomas delineates class along crude, Dickensian lines, describing the poor, the very poor, and the rich. Amongst the characters at the top end of the economic scale, class is a rigid set of precepts designed to sustain by maxim, dogma and retribution the status quo, so when Rock marries a working-class girl, a girl 'below' him, society, *his part of society*, reacts aggressively. As his sister Annabella puts it, 'People have long memories. They don't forget that you disgraced your name, *and* mine, and defied

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<sup>191</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 10.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

every social decency when you married'.<sup>194</sup> This defiance leads to ostracism, whereby his peers refuse, according to Annabella, to 'sit at table with *her*' (a quasi-religious rebuttal with undertones of hygiene concern that we shall see again in 'The Peaches'), which in turn obscures the genuine fear of class homogenisation. Rock ascribes this reaction to snobbery and prudery, however Annabella disproves at least the prudery part of Rock's accusation by exclaiming, 'I have never understood why you didn't keep the girl as your mistress in some other part of town. [...] But no, you have to bring your shabby amours back into the house and *legalize* them'.<sup>195</sup> The legality of their union offends Annabella the most, as it disrupts the static cultural exclusivity so carefully cultivated by her class and, more importantly, disturbs the normative value system of that class. To put it crudely, she could be said to perceive her brother's union as a dilution, rather than a consolidation, of her class, and hence a devaluation of the perceived purity of that class.

Rock's wife, Elizabeth, has a far more nuanced opinion than her husband. Like her sister-in-law, Rock's wife, who is a relative outsider, can see that it is indeed a matter of preservation, of insularity, that drives them to behave in this way: 'They think that if they don't *show* they're angry *all* the doctors and lawyers will be marrying market girls and housemaids'.<sup>196</sup> This vision of a society (presented as dystopian) in which the respective classes mix, socialise and then marry is exactly what Annabella wishes to avoid, hence her preference for keeping mistresses 'in some other part of town' and away from home and the dinner table. In 'some other part of town' they are merely used, not integrated.

Rock's situation is paralleled in the subplot of Murray, where the same issues of class prevent happy congress between Rock's less enigmatic colleague and his own working-class love, Jennie Bailey. Thomas's distinction between the poor and the very poor is worked out in

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<sup>194</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), pp. 14-15.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

the respective fates of Rock's wife and Murray's love interest, as we find that Elizabeth is, by the end of the film, shunned not because of her class but rather due to her association with her husband,<sup>197</sup> whilst Jennie Bailey has been murdered and subsequently dissected by the students of Rock's Academy. The difference between Elizabeth and Jennie, crucially, is that one was a housemaid and the other a prostitute, the former included in the structure of everyday bourgeois life, the latter (publically, at least) excluded from it (in the case of Jennie, this exclusion is seen in the furtive nature of her relationship with Murray). The distinction is belied by Rock himself, an admission that also betrays his true feelings on class:

ROCK: [...]

And what if she *was* murdered, Mr. Murray? We are anatomists, not policemen; we are scientists, not moralists. Do *I, I*, care if every lewd and sottish woman of the streets has her throat slit from ear to ear? She served no purpose in life save the cheapening of physical passion and the petty traffics of lust. Let her serve her purpose in death.<sup>198</sup>

Rock, confronted with a challenge to his ability to exploit the poor (through an accusation of paying murderers for bodies), reverts to doctrinal notions of utility (such as keeping mistresses 'in some other part of town') and thereby exposes his own public ideas of equality (expressed earlier in the book in order to justify his marriage to Elizabeth, and to which I shall return)<sup>199</sup> as a fantasy, one which Althusser explains as a function of survival and the continuation of the ability to exploit:

In reality, the bourgeoisie has to believe in its own myth before it can convince others, [...] since what it lives in its ideology is *the very relation* between it and its real conditions of existence which allows it simultaneously to act on itself (provide itself with a legal and ethical consciousness, and the ethical conditions of economic liberalism) and on others (those it exploits and is going to exploit in the future: the 'free labourers') so as to take up, occupy and maintain its historical role as a ruling class.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 119.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>200</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 234.

Rock's own desire for economic liberty (if not wholehearted economic liberalism) is seen in his comment to Murray, 'I need bodies. They brought bodies. I pay for what I need. I do not hire murderers...'.<sup>201</sup> By testing the boundaries of the conditions of existence within which Rock operates, Thomas suggests that the limits of the 'ethical consciousness' of the ruling class can be revealed but not broken, exposed but not shattered, even where latent hypocrisy is central to the self-deception. Rock's defence becomes one of wilful ignorance on the part of a highly educated man.

The repercussions for Murray of disrupting the elaborate lie that Rock had developed for himself reaffirm the importance of this lie and, therefore, the need to vengefully protect it. That Rock is aware of Murray's private love for Jennie Bailey (albeit a love restrained by class anxiety) is evidenced by Rock's insistence that Murray sketch Jennie's body before it is put into a brine bath, or, as Rock puts it, 'perpetuate on paper the loveliness of this poor clay'<sup>202</sup> – Thomas perhaps alluding to the suggestion made by some of the witnesses of Knox and his contemporaries' work that they exhibited a penchant for 'necrophilic voyeurism'.<sup>203</sup> By tormenting Murray with this gruesome task, Rock seems to be repeating, in an exaggerated fashion, the persecution to which he himself had been subjected by his peers as a result of his marriage to Elizabeth. The way in which Rock makes this demand in front of his own students (who are likewise seemingly aware of Murray's relationship with Jennie)<sup>204</sup> recalls Elizabeth's comment regarding the need to be obvious about disapproval when it comes to matters of love ('They think that if they don't *show* they're angry', etc.) and is therefore done as much as part of Rock's lesson to his students as to punish the helpless Murray, although instead of worrying

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<sup>201</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 70.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, p. 71.

<sup>203</sup> Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 96.

<sup>204</sup> Thomas notes in his direction that:

Murray does not move.

The eyes of the students are upon him.

(Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 71).

that all the doctors and lawyers will be ‘marrying market girls and housemaids’, Rock is concerned that they will be running off with ‘every lewd and sottish woman of the streets’.

The hypocrisy inherent in Rock’s simultaneous position as public champion of social reform and private defender of tradition (as well as self-interest) reveals Thomas’s dissatisfaction with the posturing of those he perceived as ‘pseudo-revolutionaries’, who, according to Thomas, had ‘no idea at all of what they priggishly call ‘the class struggle’ and no contact at all with either any of the real motives or the real protagonists of that class struggle’.<sup>205</sup> Rock, as an astute, intelligent and erudite challenger of received wisdom (not to mention an academic), likewise lambasts his dinner guests with stories of the poverty all around them, yet later shies away at the thought of scientific progress being impeded by a prostitute, who becomes worthwhile only when she becomes an anonymous, classless subject of anatomical study, worthy of attention solely when her status as a ‘real protagonist’ is negated. In this respect, she is typical of the other victims of Fallon and Broom, all of whom are killed within the confines of the low-rent Lodging House in ‘Rag-and-Bone Alley’ frequented by the pair, in that she is one of the coterie of ‘the beggars, and the cripples, and the tainted children, and the pitiful, doomed girls’ whom Rock evokes when making his after-dinner tirade and who serve, in a purely hypothetical sense, to flesh out Rock’s elaborate delusion regarding his attitude to the poor, an outlook so clearly contradicted in his treatment of Jennie.<sup>206</sup> Rock’s eloquent evocation of the poor, which he concludes with a charge to his guests to ‘[w]rite a scholastic pamphlet on the things that prowl in the alleys, afraid to see the light; they were men and women once’,<sup>207</sup> shows that, when unchallenged, he does indeed ‘believe in [his] own myth’ and is determined to ‘convince others’ of its validity.

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<sup>205</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 212.

<sup>206</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 23.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

Society in *The Doctor and the Devils* exists, therefore, in the happy confluence of the delusions of the self-indulgent ruling class and the willingness of the proletariat to serve it as required. When this convergence is disrupted, as it is by Murray to a small degree, but with more effect later on by Mrs. Webb (who suspects Fallon and Broom of murder), the result is civil unrest and rioting in the streets. Thomas's depiction of this revolt is accompanied by repeated references to the biblical notion of the Day of Judgement (a day when the dead rise up out of the ground of their own accord and without the assistance of grave-robbers). This begins with Fallon solemnly conjecturing that their cart-horse, which refuses to carry the body of Billy Bedlam to Rock's Academy, 'had risen in judgment against [them]',<sup>208</sup> continues with Fallon telling Mrs. Webb, 'You're an auld spoil-sport, Mrs. Webb, you'd stop the dead dancin' on Judgement Day',<sup>209</sup> and concludes with Fallon, commenting on the relentless snow, that 'It's like the last day',<sup>210</sup> a sight which accompanies his resignation at the thought of being condemned to hell ('It's cold in hell to-day. The fires are out' and 'Nothing can burn me any more'),<sup>211</sup> a resignation which Rock echoes when he says shortly afterwards:

ROCK: Outside the gates of hell are not the words 'Abandon Hope All  
Ye Who Enter Here,' but 'I Told You So.'<sup>212</sup>

Rock's comment alludes to a dramatic symbiosis between Rock and Fallon, both of whom experience similar symptoms of remorse (indeed, Rock's attitude initially mocks Fallon's downfall, such as in the allusion to Dante above, as well as a further quip regarding having a 'seat *reserved* in hell' shortly before it).<sup>213</sup> For Fallon, this remorse springs from his acknowledgement that the people he has killed are, like him, living in poverty:

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<sup>208</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 84.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid*, p. 95.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, p. 97.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, p. 109.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, p. 108.

NELLY: Broom says you're to come.  
 Fallon stares in front of him.  
 NELLY: He says there's ... work.  
 FALLON: [Without turning to her.] My hands have worked enough.  
           There's devils in my hands.  
 NELLY: It's ... somebody we know Broom's got there....  
 FALLON: I've known all, all of them. They were my brothers ... and  
           my sisters ... and my mother ... [In a horrified whisper.] ... All dead  
           ... dead ...<sup>214</sup>

The corruption of the word 'work' alludes to the economic factors at play in the actions of Fallon and Broom, just as it is in Hitler's speech in 'These Are The Men', mentioned earlier. When we first see them, they are penniless and begging for money from Nelly, who owns the Lodging House in which Fallon and Broom find their victims and with whom they collude, but we learn from Fallon shortly after the above speech that he was not always destitute: 'I wish I was workin' again, on the roads, on the canals, anywhere ...'.<sup>215</sup> The repeated use of 'work' is starkly juxtaposed with the other, corrupt usage, thereby reinforcing the distinction. Fallon is, therefore, less of a professional murderer and more of an opportunistic one, driven to it by circumstance. His guilt at murdering his fellow men and women is ultimately mixed with regret at having abandoned, or desperation at having been denied, 'the opportunity for free creative labour', just as is revealed in *Our Country*.<sup>216</sup> By having Fallon refer to his victims as his 'brothers', 'sisters' and 'mother', Thomas is again employing the lexicon of left-wing politics, just as he did in 'These Are The Men', 'Wales: Green Mountain, Black Mountain', 'New Towns for Old' and 'A City Re-Born', reinforcing the political message of the film. Fallon's realisation that he has acted against, and exploited, his own community directly results in his crisis, and it is clear, I think, that Thomas was keen for the viewer to understand this crisis as

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<sup>214</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 80. Nb. Comments in square brackets are Thomas's.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80.

<sup>216</sup> Victor Paananen, 'The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 46-66 (p. 57).



one motivated by a socio-political, as well as a moral, awareness. It is one thing to be part of a community that is exploited, but quite another to become an agent of that exploitation.

Fallon's comment that '[t]here's devils in my hands' is followed shortly afterwards by an exchange between Rock and Elizabeth in which Rock says '[Murray] suffers from hallucinations. My hands, to him, are red as Macbeth's ...'. This remark is immediately followed by Fallon again saying, 'There's devils in my hands'.<sup>217</sup> The interchange of anxiety regarding their hands is resolved only in the final sequence, in which Rock walks on a hill overlooking the city in a scene reminiscent of the opening of the film:

ROCK: And the child in the cold runs away from my name ...  
My name is a ghost to frighten children ...  
Will my children cry 'Murder' and 'Blood' when I touch them ... as  
if my hands were Fallon's hands? ...  
[...]  
All's over now ...  
Oh, Elizabeth, hold my hand...  
'Oh, it isn't a hand, it's a pair of scissors!...'  
[...]  
Did I set myself above pity?...  
*Oh, my God, I knew what I was doing!*<sup>218</sup>

The emphasis on hands, seen in the transposition of Fallon's onto Rock and the metamorphosis of Rock's hands into scissors, stresses the corruption of the notion of free, creative labour, the loss of which Fallon regrets earlier in the film. The *Macbeth* parallels are obvious, yet Thomas takes the anxieties of Lady Macbeth and, by correlating the sense of the corrupted individual with the corrupt occupation (such as when Fallon says, 'My hands have worked enough' and when Rock imagines his hands as scissors),<sup>219</sup> lends to these anxieties a political tint, implying

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<sup>217</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 89.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>219</sup> Thomas may also be making a subtle reference to his poem 'When, like a running grave', a poem in which 'a scissors stalking' symbolises the process of aging and a cadaver is the main protagonist. Emery sees in it signs of 'a revolution shortly to take place', leading 'to the overthrow of the dictators' by the cadaver, a reading which would, in the context of the fall of Rock and the resultant social unrest, make much sense (Clerk Emery, *The World of Dylan Thomas* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. 115). However, Korg's reading of the poem, which sees an anxious Thomas as the central character, might be equally applicable to Rock himself, focusing as it does on the sense of disappointment that characterises the final two stanzas:

a similar misuse of creative, productive energy, just as was evident in *These Are The Men* when those who were once ‘ploughing the earth’ were instead forced to dig graves.<sup>220</sup> That Rock’s fixation on his hands should coincide with an acknowledgement of his culpability (*‘I knew what I was doing’*) further reinforces the link between Fallon and Rock by echoing Fallon’s lament regarding devils.<sup>221</sup>

From Sequence 110 onwards, there are two, distinct sources of opposition to Rock (and, to a lesser extent, Fallon, Broom, Nelly and a further accomplice, Kate): the general populace of the city and the ruling class. The latter is forced to intervene in the case of Rock and protect him from public prosecution for no other reason than self-preservation:

HOCKING: I do not exonerate Doctor Rock, but I will not have the whole medical profession of the City put on trial.

GREEN: Accuse Rock, you accuse the integrity of all the surgeons in the City.

The Chairman (the Lord Chief Justice) nods in agreement.

HOCKING: Oh, more than that. The whole aristocracy of learning that has been so carefully built up would be tumbled to the ground. The stain upon his character would spread across the whole of our culture. There could be no more respect for us. Indictment of Rock would mean *the death of a class...* (italics in original)<sup>222</sup>

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He [Thomas] sees himself as a victim of the ironies of the dialectic universe, one who attached a desperate importance to ephemeral satisfactions but was constantly being left defeated and in ridiculous positions by intractable realities.

(Jacob Korg, *Dylan Thomas* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 74.)

<sup>220</sup> A ballad written at the time of the Burke trial had a similar theme, and it is entirely possible that Thomas had this in mind when constructing these images:

But woe to the riches and skill thus obtained,  
Woe to the wretch that would injure the dead,  
And woe to his portion whose fingers are stained  
With the red drops of life that he cruelly shed.

(*Ballad on William Burke*, quoted in Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 131.)

<sup>221</sup> An interesting corrective to Thomas’s account is the real-life account of the limits of Burke’s remorse. Contemporary reports suggest that he was more aggrieved at having not been fully compensated by Dr. Knox for the body of Mary Docherty (on whom the final victim of the film, Mrs. Flynn, is based), complaining that he wished to buy a presentable coat to wear on the day of his execution. Given that in most aspects of the film Thomas is keen to remain faithful to the events as they happened, it is noteworthy that the Burke character should exhibit such anxieties, again suggesting that Thomas wished to impart a socio-political message (Martin Fido, *Bodysnatchers, A History of Resurrectionists, 1742 – 1832* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, 1988), p. 129).

<sup>222</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 111.

Thomas's emphasis on the survival instinct of the ruling class (in particular, that it depends so completely on what is shown, by the actions of the ruling class, to be a fictitious sense of 'integrity') draws the narrative argument back to the conceit of the ends justifying the means. Here, however, the ends are not human or scientific progress, but the mere continuation of a 'culture' of powerful individuals who are in a position to defend that culture. Indeed, Althusser's contention that 'the bourgeoisie has to believe in its own myth' is evident here, as well as in the following scenes, one in which two gentlemen discuss Rock's plight and conclude that '[g]uilty or not guilty, his part in this affair must be kept in a decent obscurity, or Anarchy will be walking abroad in the land',<sup>223</sup> and another in which two Professors, one of whom labels Rock 'a *symbol*' (Thomas's italics), compare their own position to that of royalty:

SECOND PROFESSOR: ... and if a member of the royal family is  
accused of a commoner's crime, then it is the *whole family* that is  
accused. An elaborate simile – but you see my point?  
And the two professors wag their chins in complete agreement.<sup>224</sup>

No doubt Thomas intended the 'elaborate simile' to appear comedic, especially by employing a word such as 'commoner' in this context. It does, however, make the point that, when defending a position of power, any comparison, metaphor or simile which attempts to justify the position itself by means purely of itself (i.e. an 'aristocracy of learning' exists as such and so must be defended as such) can only reveal the desperation and facetiousness of that defence.

Through their attempts to make Rock a 'symbol', to keep him in a 'decent obscurity', to, in a sense, obscure the material essence of one of their own, Thomas is satirising what he perceived as the resilient, delusional protectionism of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, even when one of the ruling class suggests that they 'are forgetting the murder of children and old women in our concern for our sacred society of autocratic schoolmen',<sup>225</sup> his objection is managed by careful manipulation (and knowledge) of the law (in so far as Rock will be named as a witness,

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<sup>223</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 112.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

but not called).<sup>226</sup> In this way, they are able to ‘save the good name of society’, as the Chairman who contrives to spare Rock his duties as witness puts it. The same Chairman, however, also alludes to the private, unseen punishment which awaits Rock once order has been restored, when he says, ‘We save him from public ruin, so that we can ruin him privately’, an admission which marks a return to the Althusserian mythic state since it implies that their motivation was to save Rock and not themselves, as well as recalling Elizabeth’s comment that the ruling elite have to ‘show they’re angry’ or else jeopardise the stability of that elite.

The decisions which are made about Rock’s future are done so against a backdrop of civil disquiet (just as Rhodri Huws’ statement was accompanied by the presence of a crowd in *Rebecca’s Daughters*), with the sound of rioters accompanying nearly all successive sequences. Thomas ensures that the crowd directs the significant part of its anger not against Fallon, but against Rock, who they perceive as the cause of the murders, as evidenced by their chant:

FIRST VOICE: Up the alley and down the street ...

[...]

SECOND VOICE: Fallon and Broom sell bones and meat ...

[...]

THIRD VOICE: Fallon’s the butcher, Broom’s the thief ...

[...]

FOURTH VOICE: And Rock’s the boy who buys the beef ...<sup>227</sup>

That the crowd articulate their objections in terms of demand and supply implies recognition of the exploitative relationship Rock has with Fallon and Broom, acknowledging that without Rock these murders would not have occurred as the demand would not have existed.<sup>228</sup> The

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<sup>226</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 113.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>228</sup> Sir Walter Scott observed the crowds that protested against Knox and commented that ‘The mob, which was immense, demanded Knox and Hare, but, though greedy for more victims, received with shouts the solitary wretch [William Burke] who found his way to the gallows out of the five or six who seem not less guilty than he’. This is, therefore, an accurate rendering by Thomas of the mood at the time, namely that, though guilty, Burke was not perceived as being solely to blame. (Quoted in Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 133).

crowd, however, serves another purpose, namely that it enhances the class structure Thomas implies throughout and which we see in a state of hostile opposition once the distinction between the exploiters and the exploited is exposed. So, when the crowd begin to throw stones at Rock's Academy during a lecture, the reaction of the students is to confront the rioters as an opposing faction. It is only Rock's angry intervention that prevents a physical clash between the two groups, an intervention that relies precisely on stressing class differences:

ROCK: I have attempted to teach you the dignity of man; I have succeeded in producing the degradation of a *mob*. Because the verminous gutter-snipes of the City snarl and the gibber in the street, because the scum from the brothels and the rot-gut shops howl for blood outside my window, must *you* conduct yourselves, in turn, as though you were born in a quagmire and nurtured on hog-wash?<sup>229</sup>

Again Rock's opinion of the very poor of the city, such as the alcoholics and the prostitutes, is made clear, whilst the fundamental moral hypocrisy inherent in this opinion is also exposed, both in terms of Rock's shifting social concerns, as well as the fact that he should complain of the base 'howl for blood outside' whilst overlooking the grossly hubristic howl for it within, namely, that it is the demand for bodies within the academy that is itself the reason for the crowds, a comparison Thomas reinforces by having Rock publish a letter, shortly before, complaining of the need for a change in the law to allow a greater supply of bodies into medical schools.<sup>230</sup> The threat to his position from the 'mob' results in a polarisation of Rock's opinions on class, with the ruling class being typified by 'the dignity of man' and the city's poor reduced to the status of animals. The crowd are therefore described as 'verminous', 'nurtured on hog-wash', and they 'howl'. In explaining his relative downfall, Rock complains:

I was successful, I was established, I was standing in the light ... Then out of the mud of the darkness come two ignorant animals, and slowly, quite unknown to themselves, they set about the task of bringing my life and my work down, down, into the slime that bred them [...]<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), pp. 116-117.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid*, p. 109.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.

Rock's insistence on an almost religious dissimilarity between himself and the 'two ignorant animals', Fallon and Broom, that accompany his ruin, marks the nadir of Rock's pretence of social concern. By emphasising the loss of an 'established' position, Thomas again reveals the importance and value attached to that position, a value which is considered so above the estimation of Fallon and Broom that they threaten it even in ignorance of it, or rather 'quite unknown to themselves', the two reduced to symbols of a grubby, predetermined<sup>232</sup> poverty just as Rock himself was transformed into a symbol of the establishment by his peers: only in abstraction can the fallacy of his opinion, as well as that of his peers (the myth, so to speak), maintain the illusion of validity.

In *The Doctor and the Devils*, Thomas explores the socio-economic aspects of the case of Knox, Burke and Hare, finding within the tale examples of exploitation ranging from the misappropriation of the bodies of the poor ('the beef', to borrow Thomas's Nietzschean analogy) to the use of Burke as a scapegoat in order to obscure the overarching crimes of Knox. When charged with the task of investigating 'the ends justifying the means', Thomas therefore went beyond the medico-ethical implications of the concept, to reveal the societal framework within which such an approach might flourish, a framework alluded to by the title of a pamphlet, written under the pseudonym *Echo of Surgeons' Square* but later attributed to Knox's doorkeeper (depicted as Tom in *The Doctor and The Devils*), in which it was asked 'What? Shall wealth screen thee from justice?',<sup>233</sup> a question which Thomas clearly believed was answered resolutely in the affirmative.

This anti-establishment stance, focused as it is on varying degrees of economic exploitation, is distinctly egalitarian, dispelling the myth of meritocracy by revealing how much additional assistance those in a position of power have access to, and how it is

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<sup>232</sup> 'ROCK: [...] Perhaps, from the very moment of their monstrous births, it was decreed, by some sadistic jack-in-office of the universe, that they should befoul and ruin a fellow creature they had never heard of [...]' (Dylan Thomas, *The Doctor and the Devils and Other Scripts* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 120).

<sup>233</sup> Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 137.

unforgivingly maintained. It is, therefore, another example of Thomas weaving Socialism into his literature, portraying violations of the fundamental equality of all people, and showing where wealth ‘screens’ the wealthy in ways that the poor can only wonder at.

### 1.6 Under the Common Sun

Thomas started writing film scripts in order to escape his ‘horror’ of killing, which on the face of it might have sounded like an elaborate side-stepping of outright pacifism so as to avoid the charge of conscientious objection (and, therefore, imprisonment). However, throughout the film scripts that Thomas subsequently produced, we see again and again a great love of, and faith in, society, and faith in the idea that rebuilding the streets of Britain could itself enable the restructuring of society along less exploitative, yet no less productive, lines. The challenge, as depicted in works as diverse as *New Towns for Old*, *These Are The Men* and *The Doctor and the Devils*, comes in making society first value itself enough, and to have sufficient confidence in itself, to become self-governing, and secondly to make it aware enough of the exploitation that it is the victim of to want to overturn the old structures that have for so long exploited it, whether in the times of the Rebecca Riots, the body-snatchers, during war, or in the period of post-war recovery.

The films Thomas wrote consistently reinforce a view of a society split between the workers and those who, through power, exploit them and their labour. Thomas began as a propagandist for the government, but through his subtle (and, at times, explicit) use of Socialist themes, arguments and language, he sought to undermine the very structures the governing class had built and which, when threatened, they ruthlessly sought to protect.

## 2. THE RADIO SCRIPTS

‘And contempt for the public [...]  
is contempt for the profound usefulness of your own craft’

Dylan Thomas, *Poets on Poetry*

A contradictory quality could be perceived in the notion of a writer celebrated for his bardic qualities embracing the technology of his day, or indeed making his living as a radio celebrity. Likewise, for a poet to emerge from the vibrancy of Modernism into the politically reactionary, intellectualised milieu of the ‘MacSpaunday’ group to devote a considerable amount of his time to radio features intended for mass consumption seems similarly out of the ordinary. The most likely reasons for Thomas to engage with the new media of the day, it seems, were also the most mundane: Thomas had bills to pay, and, just as with writing propagandistic film scripts, he wanted to avoid war work without ending up in jail. Being employed by the British Broadcasting Corporation would help him to achieve these aims.<sup>234</sup>

That said, the artistic avantgarde, to which Thomas certainly leaned,<sup>235</sup> embraced technology as a valuable component of contemporary life, as fit for use in art and literature as anything. Indeed, ‘[...] technology played a crucial, if not *the* crucial, role in the avantgarde’s attempt to overcome the art/life dichotomy and make art productive in the transformation of everyday life’<sup>236</sup> as Huyssen comments. Thomas’s radio works, though less experimental than the works undertaken by the vanguard of contemporary arts, express a similar, innate desire to ‘make art productive’, and through engaging with a medium that was already employing so many other writers during the 1940s, Thomas could benefit from the kind of exposure that printed poetry alone could never hope to achieve. At the heart of Thomas’s many broadcasts

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<sup>234</sup> Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography (New Edition)* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 195.

<sup>235</sup> Although he strongly denied any association with the Movement, Thomas’s poems were frequently mistaken for surrealist works because of their highly original use of language and recurring references to the body and its functions (*Ibid.*, p. 135).

<sup>236</sup> Andrew Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 9.



there is a firm belief in the transformative, didactic quality of literature, as well as a clear intent to relate it to the lives of as wide an audience as possible, irrespective of their existing literary knowledge.

Just as the authoring of film scripts had allowed Thomas the opportunity to deprecate society's inequalities and to present, through works such as *The Doctor and the Devils* and *Rebecca's Daughters*, locations of what he perceived as a very necessary class struggle, so too would the radio scripts. However, in working for an institution of the character of the BBC, Thomas would be afforded far greater license than the Ministry of Information would have tolerated when he was authoring their propaganda. Indeed, the BBC operated in a privileged, detached manner from the state during the decade Thomas was engaged by the organisation (1943 – 1953), as Andrew Sinclair notes:

Although [the BBC] was a monopoly and funded by the state, its first Director-General John Reith had won for it a kind of independence, refusing to broadcast government propaganda against the workers during the General Strike of 1926. Although he had retired before the outbreak of hostilities, and even with the restrictions of war censorship, a tradition of free speech and irreverence for authority remained [...]<sup>237</sup>

This was, as Sinclair also observes, a situation supported by the political Left. Under the aegis of such notables as Randall Swingler, Cyril Connolly and Stephen Spender, left-wing writers and editors viewed the greater dissemination of art during the war as a positive product of state intervention, and wished to see the trend continue after the end of hostilities.<sup>238</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that the BBC gave Thomas free rein to say what he liked, nor offered him complete stylistic freedom. His initial attempts at scriptwriting at the beginning of the 1940's saw one effort (*Cristobal Colon*) having to be rewritten completely, and another (*March of the Czech Legion across Russia in the last war*) rejected out of hand, possibly for its political

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<sup>237</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 167.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167.

tone, although sadly no script survives.<sup>239</sup> After the war, an openly Socialist, or worse Communist, tone may have been unsuitable for reasons other than appearing subversive or trying to incite a popular revolution. Soviet Russia had, after all, done much to make itself unpopular in the eyes of both Left and Right. Inadequate (not to mention expensive) support for the resistance during the Spanish Civil War had contributed to the failure of the Republicans to overturn Franco's forces,<sup>240</sup> whilst the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop non-aggression Pact with Germany in 1939 made them even less popular with opponents of Fascism. Moreover, Russia's eagerness to join the atomic arms race following the end of the war compounded the problem for those who dreamt of a utopian future free of conflict. If anything, by viewing America's military potential with such obvious envy, Russia was driving the world towards an even greater level of devastation than it had just survived. For the intelligentsia of the 1940s, the hopes of the preceding decade seemed distant, and the language of that time, as well as serving as a reminder of this distance, also raised some difficult questions about party politics and what totalitarianism of whatever sort would mean for Europe, especially in light of the rule of Stalin.<sup>241</sup> MacNeice commented in *The Strings Are False* (written in 1941, but only published in 1965) that he 'understood more clearly than ever, the negative influence of the Soviet myth upon the Western Socialist movement'<sup>242</sup> and even Auden was not immune to a sense of disillusionment, writing in 1940:

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<sup>239</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. ix. Cf. *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 553:

The script uses five announcers [...] 'War. The shadow of the eagle is cast on the grazing lands, the meadows of Belgium are green no longer, and the pastures are barbed with bayonets. War. War.' Five announcers, and a chorus of patriots crying 'Siberia', 'Freedom of Man', 'Strengthen us for the approaching hour' like a bunch of trained bulls.

<sup>240</sup> Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (London: The Bodley Head, 2009), pp. 89 – 90.

<sup>241</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 208.

<sup>242</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, quoted in Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 463.

We hoped; we waited for the day  
The State would wither clean away,  
Expecting the Millennium  
That theory promised us would come.  
It didn't.<sup>243</sup>

Against the polemical backdrop of the 'Auden Group', Thomas's coruscating verbal wordplay and obsessive self-examination can make the publication of, for example, *The Map of Love* (1939) seem wholly out of step with the poetical and political zeitgeist. Indeed, establishing a link between the poetry of Auden, MacNeice, Spender or Day-Lewis with that of Thomas is complicated further by the relative stances they adopted when it came to the place that poetry held – or could be made to hold – in political debate, with a concomitant linguistic *dividing of the ways* (according to Thomas) occurring as a result. Understanding this divide, and, perhaps more importantly, why Thomas chose not to adopt a more political approach to his poetry, is evident throughout many of his radio works.

Throughout the 1930s, the Auden Group attempted to formulate a critical understanding of the poetic idiom in the context of the social and historical. Auden asserted in his introduction to *The Poet's Tongue* (1935) that

[t]he propagandist, whether moral or political, complains that the writer should use his powers over words to persuade people to a particular course of action, instead of fiddling while Rome burns. But poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.<sup>244</sup>

As Samuel Hynes writes, 'Art remains Art, but it performs a social role',<sup>245</sup> and in *Vienna* (1934) Spender attempts to marry the social to the personal through art and 'to relate the public passion to my private life'.<sup>246</sup> I mention this work in particular because Thomas reviewed it for

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<sup>243</sup> W. H. Auden, 'New Year Letter' quoted in Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 112.

<sup>244</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 14.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

*New Verse* and condemned it as ‘a bad poem’,<sup>247</sup> though Spender himself also viewed it as his ‘least successful’ attempt to examine the influence of historical events on the private individual.<sup>248</sup> Thomas’s criticism of *Vienna*, however, centres on Spender’s use of language, specifically how he fails, in Thomas’s view, to retain the artistic qualities of verse in his descriptions of a terrible event in the history of Austrian Socialism and in his pursuit of an overtly political idea – namely that ‘in a world where humanity was trampled on publicly, private affection was also undermined’.<sup>249</sup> Thomas wrote:

Dollfuss and Fey are nice words. Does it really matter if they are, or are not, nice men? This would appear ridiculous if it were not for the fact that Mr. Spender, working now away from words, regarded only the historic significance of these two men as being important, and not the verbal context in which he placed the letters that make up their names.<sup>250</sup>

Thomas also suggests that on

pages 15, 19, 20, 25, 30, 37, 38, 41 and 42, and on other pages, will be found lines, passages, images, and clusters of images of a falsity and affected ugliness as uncommon to the past Mr. Spender as they are common to the present political poets [...]<sup>251</sup>

The second point is rather pettily made, however both statements are indicative of Thomas’s firm belief in the primacy of poetic craft over political intent, of the word, its cadence and linguistic context, over the isolated figure or trope. In this respect, it is the congruity of form, idea and content that is of the greatest importance to Thomas, to the extent that he would risk appearing grossly insensitive or shallow when he remarks on ‘Dollfuss and Fey’ as nothing more than ‘nice words’ in order to highlight the dominance of the linguistic over politico-historical significance. Yet it is the ‘falsity and affected ugliness’ of Spender’s *nostalgie de la*

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<sup>247</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writing*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. 170.

<sup>248</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 149.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writing*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), pp. 169 - 170.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

*boue* (specifically his inability to articulate it in poetic form) that renders the poem ‘bad’ and therefore deserving of such detailed criticism (right down to the page numbers). In labelling the imagery false and affected, Thomas is also questioning the authenticity of the poet – and, moreover, the ‘present political poets’ of which Spender was one of the more notable figures – as well as the motivation that lay behind the choice of imagery. Added to which, earlier in the review Thomas states that ‘[t]he propaganda is bad, to be condemned, and even despised, by the real communist’.<sup>252</sup> This is a powerful rebuke, tantamount to labelling Spender an impostor, and, in the comments which follow, Thomas confirms his suspicion:

Here we have a revolutionary poem published by Faber and Faber, i.e. published, one supposes, without the disapproval of the author of *The Rock*, which dignified pageant was written for a church fund, blessed by a bishop, and attended by Royalty. What sort of revolutionary propaganda would Mr. Eliot permit himself to publish? Obviously not that which would have any effect [...] <sup>253</sup>

This is not the place to discuss whether or not Thomas’s is a justified attack, but it does highlight the partisan approach Thomas took to the poetic tradition he emerged from and it underscores his persistent view of the Auden Group as, at best, a cluster of highly gifted poets whose talents are wasted, corrupted even, by the need to put poetry at the service of politics. Moreover, there is a hint of class-consciousness in Thomas’s censure, in particular his comment on *The Rock*, a ‘dignified pageant [...] written for a church fund, blessed by a bishop, and attended by Royalty’. Thomas’s point seems to be that Spender is part of an established order (the Establishment itself), whose figurehead, Eliot, represents continuity in the form of the Church and the State, and whose tacit approval, therefore, undermines whatever revolutionary angst *Vienna* purports to represent – as an example of poetry as action, it is so unthreatening that the very order it seeks to undermine will publish it. Taken alongside Thomas’s attempt to differentiate between ‘real communists’ and Spender (who employs

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<sup>252</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writing*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. 170.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

‘images of a falsity and affected ugliness’), we see that, aside from the aesthetic shortcomings of *Vienna*, there is the suspicion of disingenuousness in an upper middle-class poet’s attempts to describe or inspire a proletarian revolution. Just as we saw in *The Doctor and the Devils*, Thomas is acutely aware of the lengths those in power will go to protect their power, and Eliot would have provided a fairly safe target when it came to accusations of the elite looking out for its own.

Thomas himself never seems to have felt that poetry could or should be made to function as a medium for political discourse, even in the way that Auden felt it should lead society ‘to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice’. Indeed, in reviewing John Pudney’s *Open the Sky* (1934), Thomas lamented that Pudney was ‘too conscious of his generation’<sup>254</sup> and goes on to criticise the poet for failing in his self-appointed task of marrying ‘private subtlety and the poetry of public vitality’ in his collection:

Open the sky most certainly, but the rules of property control even that imperative idealism; it must be the personal image or illusion of the sky, and the sky must be an individual symbol; too many have opened the communal sky to find some celestial Lenin there grinning over the output of the propagandist poets.<sup>255</sup>

It is apparent from these comments that at that time Thomas viewed the loss of the individual poetic voice, as well as a loss of poetic discipline, as the major failings of the ‘political poets’, and it is here specifically that Thomas seems to have drawn a line between the works of these poets and his own. As he says of Lehmann’s *The Noise of History* (1935), references to factory closures, poverty and pawnshops in the works of many of his contemporaries ‘are no more than the fashionable compensatory fervours of a pseudo-poetic defeatism, which will be on the side of the proletariat or be damned’.<sup>256</sup> His repeated insistence, therefore, on the ‘falsity’ of the imagery, on the ‘pseudo-poetic’ in the works of those he viewed as the political poets of his

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<sup>254</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writing*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. 168.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

generation, casts a secondary doubt on the writers themselves, who are too willing to behold ‘some celestial Lenin’ in a sky transformed into a fashionable construct, to be observed and recorded by all. That it is the ‘sort of revolutionary propaganda’ that ‘Mr. Eliot [would] permit himself to publish’ further reinforces the sense of a clique with its own catechism to be recited, of the ‘Auden Generation’ as a group of writers who, in Thomas’s view, surrendered (or sacrificed) their individuality in the name of a shared idiom which they could only clumsily employ in their works and which was applauded within their learned echo chamber.<sup>257</sup>

There is evidence that Thomas could adopt this affected language too, indeed did adopt it, particularly in his unpublished notebook poems.<sup>258</sup> However, that Thomas publically distanced himself from the practice (and kept the offending poems unpublished during his lifetime) implies that he felt poetry was not a suitable medium for contemporary political discourse, a view confirmed in a letter of 1935 in which he wrote that ‘you can’t be true to party *and* poetry; one must suffer, and, historically, poetry is the social and economic creed that endures’.<sup>259</sup> The divide, however, between Thomas’s stance and that of the Auden Group would not last, as by 1939 a number of the authors Thomas had targeted, including Spender and Auden, had abandoned the idea of ‘the Millennium | That theory promised us would come’. Indeed, Auden, confirming Thomas’s view, put it most succinctly and, it might be said, with the greatest sense of bitterness and regret, in his *The Prolific and the Devourer* (written in 1939, though unpublished until 1981):

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<sup>257</sup> To Henry Treece, Thomas wrote in 1938: ‘I am not really modest at all, because, putting little trust in most of the poetry being written today, I put a great deal in mine. Today the Brotherhood of Man – love thy neighbour and, if possible, covet his arse – seems a disappointing school-society, and I cannot accept Auden as head-prefect. I think MacNeice is thin and conventionally-minded, lacking imagination, and not sound in the ear; flop Day-Lewis; and Spender, Rupert Brooke of the Depression, condemns his slight, lyrical, nostalgic talent to a clumsy and rhetorical death; I find his communism unreal [...]’ (*Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 328.)

<sup>258</sup> See Victor Paananen, ‘The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas’, *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 46-66 (p. 59), specifically Paananen’s comment that Thomas ‘would not write “propaganda” poetry. Or, rather he would not publish such poetry as it would be heard as commentary in the filmscripts’.

<sup>259</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 212.

The voice of the Tempter: 'Unless you take part in the class struggle, you cannot become a major writer.'

Works of art are created by individuals working alone.<sup>260</sup>

Spender also confessed that he had been forced 'into taking a totally false position'. As Valentine Cunningham notes:

[T]he attempts they made to become something else, to turn themselves into *faux*-proletarians, to sink their worrying self into the engrossing social mass, did not last. Sooner or later most of them broke cover and fled – hurt, wounded, but relieved no longer to have to pretend [...]<sup>261</sup>

This is the political and artistic tradition, then, from which Thomas emerged during the mid- to late-1930s, as the Auden Group abandoned the doctrine, idiom and, to an extent, aesthetics of 'political' poetry, as they 'broke cover and fled'. Thomas had remained critical of the '*faux*-proletarians' throughout, however he was, as references to 'real communists' and his questioning of a revolutionary poetry endorsed by Eliot seem to suggest, still concerned with politics and with the expression of a political will in his writing, as unwilling as he was to let his own poetry 'suffer' for it.<sup>262</sup>

However, through the film scripts he wrote and, though in a less polemical fashion, the radio work he undertook, Thomas did seek to explore the very Audenesque relationship between the public and the private life, between the audience and the poet. At the time this would necessarily involve the impact of the Second World War and, again by necessity if his works were to reach as many people as possible, the BBC. What he perceived as the

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<sup>260</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Prolific and the Devourer*, quoted in Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 265.

<sup>261</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 265. Cf. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780 – 1950* (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1958), pp. 176 – 179, in particular Williams' notes on 'negative identification'. Spender's realisation that politics had led him 'into taking a totally false position in which I am joining the CP, making public speeches, sitting on committees, etc' and that 'I realize that what I most wanted out of life was to write my own stuff and to have a satisfactory relation with Inez [Maria Pearne]' is similar to Gissing's (quoted by Williams) when he says that he 'was not a conscious hypocrite in those days of violent radicalism, working-man's-club lecturing, and the like' but nevertheless 'did not make their cause my own, but my own cause theirs'.

<sup>262</sup> This should not, however, imply that Thomas's poetry cannot be usefully read against the 1930's tradition, especially as a reaction against it. See Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. 121-123.



shortcomings of the Auden Group (be it content, form or merely class) would play a hand in how Thomas himself approached the task of helping his own audience ‘to make a rational and moral choice’.

For Thomas, as a leading *enfant terrible* of the Fitzrovia arts scene, the BBC offered no short supply of familiar faces. Friends and colleagues such as Pamela Hansford Johnson, Rayner Heppenstall, Roy Campbell, Norman Cameron, and even MacNeice,<sup>263</sup> could all be found socialising within the small area of London between Broadcasting House on Portland Place and Fitzrovia, which had itself become an island sanctuary during the blitz. It was an arrangement that would have suited Thomas greatly, allowing him to indulge in his love of literature but without becoming entrenched in long-running academic debates, a place where

he found himself working among congenial people who behaved more like journalists than academics. They knew about poetry and paid him for reading it, but on the whole they didn’t want to have long discussions about it.<sup>264</sup>

It is unsurprising, therefore, that this preference for informal discussion over heavy-handed theorising is a frequently observable characteristic of Thomas’s radio talks, especially those he gave on his own and other writers’ works.

The process of producing scripts for the BBC was, however, inevitably one which would deprive Thomas and many other writers of the chance to produce poetry (‘creative death by a thousand programmes’, as it has been called),<sup>265</sup> just as the writing of film scripts would also distract him. However, unlike the film scripts (which at times made Thomas feel as if he had ‘sold [his] immortal soul’),<sup>266</sup> he seems to have taken far greater pleasure from the time he

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<sup>263</sup> Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), pp. 229 – 230, and Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 219.

<sup>264</sup> Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography (New Edition)* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 234. Heaney acknowledges ‘Thomas’s anti-intellectualism’ in his 1992 lecture to Bennington College, noting that it was ‘a bad boy’s habit wastefully prolonged and this doctrinaire immaturity, which was at once tedious and entertaining in life, was finally retrograde for his art’ (Seamus Heaney, *Dylan the Durable? On Dylan Thomas* (New York: Bennington College, 1992), p. 28).

<sup>265</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 219.

<sup>266</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 567.

spent at the BBC. So, for example, Thomas was positively enthused by the idea, which never came to fruition,<sup>267</sup> of succeeding MacNeice as Arts Producer at the BBC, because he would be able to write ‘imaginative scripts, *of my own*’.<sup>268</sup> This enthusiasm is, I think, shown in the quality of some of his output, which is in turn reflected in the warmth and esteem with which many of Thomas’s radio works are remembered, most notably his numerous autobiographical vignettes such as *Reminiscences of Childhood* (1945), *Return Journey* (1947) and *A Child’s Christmas in Wales* (1950), although one might also add *Under Milk Wood* (1953) to this list. It could be argued, therefore, that, far from damaging his artistic legacy, working for the BBC in effect cemented it: “Stephen Spender agreed that Thomas had gained more than any other poet from his war work, writing scripts and broadcasting, which had given him ‘the sense of a theme, without taking away from the forcefulness of his imagery’”.<sup>269</sup> This emerging theme was that of society, of communities within society, but it was not just the theme which came about. Through his work with actors, as well as acting himself, Thomas also developed a highly idiosyncratic, dialogic style with which to support this theme. The theme and the style would be used together to greatest effect in *Under Milk Wood*, yet, as many have noted, the radio scripts can be read as stepping stones to, and prototypes of, his most celebrated ‘play for voices’,<sup>270</sup> using as they do techniques such as the omniscient narrator, the working of poetry and song into dialogue, and the use of a strict chronology, such as the events of a single day or a specific journey, in order to explore a specific place and its people.

The works themselves comprise a selection of radio plays, monologues, discussions and lectures, first broadcast from 1943 up until Thomas’s death in 1953. *Under Milk Wood*,

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<sup>267</sup> Thomas would never hold a regular staff position at the BBC. This seems to have been as much a matter of reputation as anything else, although a memorandum on fees had indicated that Thomas was not be considered in the same ‘celebrity class’ as authors such as Auden, Eliot, Day-Lewis or Forster, which suggests that, as late as 1951, he may have been deemed of insufficient merit or importance to warrant a regular position. (See Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography (New Edition)* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 235.)

<sup>268</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 820.

<sup>269</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 222.

<sup>270</sup> Cf. Peter Lewis, ‘The Road to Llareggub’, in *British Radio Drama*, ed. by John Drakakis (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1981), 37-71.

which was broadcast posthumously in January 1954,<sup>271</sup> will be examined in a separate chapter. Though of marginal relevance to any debate on Thomas's lasting poetic legacy, they do provide a bridge between the younger, more politically revolutionary Thomas of the 1930s, and Thomas as an established writer in the 1940s and 1950s. With Britain becoming ever more accepting of radio 'not simply as a medium of mass communication, but also as the primary agency through which our own cultural and artistic values are disseminated,'<sup>272</sup> Thomas was able to articulate his own feelings on these events in a much more public manner than he had previously been afforded. Thomas's tone softened with age and he became less inclined to write that

Few understand the works of Cummings,  
And few James Joyce's mental slummings,  
And few young Auden's coded chatter;  
But then it is the few that matter.<sup>273</sup>

The sentiment, however, is still present many years later (the above was written to Pamela Hansford Johnson in 1934), when Thomas himself was the poet that few could understand. For example, in 1949 he writes of

hairy horn-rimmed lecturers in French who tapped their Gaulloise on their  
Sartre and saw, with disdain, the pretty gasworks ripple by, ebullient Didcot  
come and go, red Reading fly by like a biscuit: they were bent on an  
existentialist spree.<sup>274</sup>

Elitism, snobbery and 'coded chatter' of any kind would always offend Thomas's literary and social sensibilities, as would the view that 'it is the few that matter', and he used a number of his radio broadcasts to express this disapproval to as many people as possible, not just 'the few'.

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<sup>271</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. iv.

<sup>272</sup> *British Radio Drama*, ed. by John Drakakis (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1981), p. 1.

<sup>273</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 86.

<sup>274</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 203.

What is evident then, apart from a change in the mode of expression from private to public (correspondence to radio broadcast) or a change in the tone from openly hostile in his reviews to more considered censure, is, more importantly, a shift from the lexicon of the political Left to a less dogmatic, less theoretical voice. When writing again to Johnson, this time in 1933, he claimed that the ‘hope of Revolution [...] is uppermost in all our minds,’<sup>275</sup> but by 1950, after visiting Iran at a time when an actual revolution was about to take place, he writes in ‘Persian Oil’ that ‘The rich are rich. Oil’s oily. And the poor are waiting’.<sup>276</sup> The voice is different, the language more guarded, but the central concern remains, and it is one of the intentions of this chapter to show how this transition occurred through a close reading of ‘Persian Oil’ and ‘The Londoner’.

## 2.1 Society and Culture

A number of Thomas’s radio works are studies of other writers and of their output, and these explications can be seen as Thomas’s most direct efforts to ‘make art productive’ by making it educational. However, in order to achieve a mode of expression which is effective for radio, Thomas avoids the unconcealed didacticism of a traditional lecture and instead assumes a conversational, disarming stance, as can be seen to great effect in this section taken from his treatise on Welsh writing in English, delivered in 1946:

DYLAN THOMAS: After Vaughan, there is no other considerable Welsh poet [...] until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. [...] There were Welshmen, certainly, who rhymed in English – Richard Lhwydd, the poet of Snowdon, for example – who wrote verse, who sometimes wrote poetry. But there were none who wrote a *poem*. [...] There is John Dyer (1700 – 58) of Carmarthenshire, whose ‘Grongar Hill’, an irregular Pindaric ode, is still remembered, if only as a name, by those who live near Grongar Hill. Dyer also wrote a blank verse epic in four books, ‘The Fleece’, in which he discoursed on the tending of sheep, of shearing and weaving, and of trade in woollen manufactures. We must read it together one day.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 72.

<sup>276</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 244.

<sup>277</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 35. Thomas would invoke Grongar Hill and the memory of John Dyer in *Under Milk Wood* in one of the Reverend Eli Jenkins’ prayers (Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph

Thomas consciously disarms the subject of his talk by combining critique with humour. On the one hand Thomas explains that Dyer's most noteworthy poem took the form of a Pindaric ode, whilst on the other joking that it is only remembered by those living in the area after which it gains its title. Similarly, he informs us of Dyer's 'blank verse epic in four books', whilst at the same time revealing his obvious amusement at the subject of the work with his deadpan desire to 'read it together one day'. This almost conspiratorial approach to literary history is deliberately inclusive, written to appeal to as many people as possible, irrespective of their knowledge of poetry. Indeed, Thomas begins his talk by claiming that the 'position' (a word he appears to find pretentious) of the Welsh poet writing in English is 'made by many people, unnecessarily, and trivially, difficult'<sup>278</sup> and continues by assuring the listener that 'I would prefer to call this an anthology, with comments, rather than a brief lecture with quotations'.<sup>279</sup> In both instances Thomas is appealing to his listener to perceive him not as an establishment figure, not as one of the 'many people' making the 'position' of the poet difficult, but as somebody equipped only 'with comments', implying an informality that a 'lecture with quotations' might lack (or even consciously struggle to avoid). It is of course a facet of a radio broadcast that it should have a broader audience than, say, a formal lecture, however Thomas's assertion that he is unlike the 'many people' making poetry difficult seems to imply the hint of an agenda over and above a compromise made on account of the medium, suggesting rather that he wishes to engage with the audience on a more equal footing.

The content of his 'Welsh Poetry' is, as promised, anthological, with several distinct themes emerging, namely nature, war and poverty. Thomas's treatment of the last of these, when discussing the works of Idris Davies, is particularly direct and unashamedly bellicose:

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Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 20). See Jackie Benjamin, 'Misrule in Milk Wood: A Bakhtinian Reading of Dylan Thomas's "Play for Voices"' in *Welsh Writing in English, Volume 9*, ed. by Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 50-79 (p. 61).

<sup>278</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 31.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[...] out of the mining valleys of South Wales, there were poets who were beginning to write in a spirit of passionate anger against the inequality of social conditions. They wrote [...] of the lies and ugliness of the unnatural system of society under which they worked – or, more often during the nineteen-twenties and thirties, under which they were not allowed to work.<sup>280</sup>

Thomas here reveals his own ‘passionate anger’, recalling, amongst others, his film script for ‘Wales: Green Mountain, Black Mountain’, especially in the details which follow:

They spoke, in ragged and angry rhythms, of the Wales *they* knew: the coaltips, the dole-queues, the stubborn bankrupt villages, the children scrutting for coal on the slagheaps, the colliers’ shabby allotments, the cheapjack cinema, the whippet-races, the disused quarries, the still pit-wheels, the gaunt tinroofed chapels in the soot, the hewers squatting in the cut, the pubs, the Woolworths, the deacons and the gyppos, silicosis, little Moscow up beyond the hills, sag-roof factory and plumeless stack, stone-grey street, scummed river, the capped and muffled knots of men outside the grim Labour Exchange and the Public Library.<sup>281</sup>

The ‘ragged and angry rhythms’ typical of the South Wales mining valley poets are employed by Thomas to both prefigure a reading from Davies’ own ‘The Angry Summer’ (a poem expressing unambiguous dissatisfaction with the politics of Britain) as well as to highlight the ‘lies and ugliness of the unnatural system of society’ to his listeners himself. In this way, Thomas temporarily at least aligns himself with those writers, adapting his language to correspond with that of Davies. Indeed, Thomas’s list of the symbols of poverty in South Wales is more exhaustive than Davies’, not to mention more colloquial (e.g. ‘scrutting for coal’, ‘the deacons and the gyppos’, and ‘little Moscow’, a reference to the village of Maerdy, which gained notoriety during the 1926 General Strike as the site where a picket line at a local coal mine held without once being crossed).<sup>282</sup> Moreover, Thomas employs many of his skills as a poet in his introduction, describing the ‘stubborn bankrupt village’, the ‘gaunt tinroofed chapels’, and the ‘knots of men’ waiting outside the ‘grim Labour Exchange,’ his use here of

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<sup>280</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 43.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> Kenneth Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation (History of Wales, vol. 6)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 195.

transferred epithets prominently underlining the plight of those he is recalling. Whilst his use of alliteration and internal rhyme (for example, ‘the still pit-wheels’ or ‘the gyppos, silicosis, little Moscow up beyond the hills’) create a sense of momentum and multiplicity, an effect which reinforces the ‘spirit of passionate anger’ in both Thomas and the poet that he is introducing.

It is interesting to note again the emphasis Thomas places on the need for work, just as he had in, amongst other film scripts, ‘Our Country’, when he speaks of the ‘knots of men outside the grim Labour Exchange’ and, prior to that, when he remarks on ‘the unnatural system of society [...] under which they were not allowed to work’. That it should be an ‘unnatural’ system suggests that Thomas had very particular views on capitalism. In a letter to the *Swansea and West Wales Guardian* of 1934 (some twelve years before this broadcast), Thomas commented on ‘this decomposing system of society,’ describing the capitalist view of man as ‘a creature that works for the profit of its fellow creatures so that it may drag out its days and eat what it is provided and be buried at its own expense,’<sup>283</sup> his use of the word ‘creature’ implying the very sense of unnaturalness that he would identify in ‘Welsh Poetry’ with his ‘knots of men’. Moreover, that Thomas should return to this dissatisfaction at the prevailing system of society twelve years after his original comment suggests that his initial anger (which was prompted in no small part by the presence of the British Union of Fascists in Swansea at that time) was neither fleeting nor temporary, but rather represented an ongoing resentment that Thomas would revisit throughout his life and, indeed, in many of his broadcasts, films and poems.

A considerable part of Thomas’s estimation of poetry, as evidenced in his broadcasts, is the place of poetry and the poet within society. So, in ‘Welsh Poetry’, for example, Thomas asserts the importance of Wilfred Owen as ‘the *pleader* of the sufferings of men’ and that

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<sup>283</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 170.

‘murdered manhood is given a great and dark golden tongue’ by his works. ‘[M]urdered manhood’ is, in Thomas’s reading of Owen’s poetry, simultaneously the elegiac subject and the possessor of the poetic voice, both the addressee and the addressed, Owen becoming a servant to ‘the sufferings of men’ by surrendering his primacy, by surrendering his own ‘tongue’, to the dead. In a separate talk on Wilfred Owen given in 1946, Thomas wrote that Owen ‘stood like Everyman, in No Man’s Land’<sup>284</sup> and that he had ‘so very many deaths to die, and so very short a life within which to endure them all’.<sup>285</sup> For Thomas, Owen succeeds as a poet because of his humility (Thomas even refers to Owen as ‘infinitely tender humble’),<sup>286</sup> submitting himself to the service of others, writing of their achievements and of their suffering in a way which deliberately obscures his own identity as poet. As Thomas says, Owen ‘is content to be the unhonoured prophet in death’s country’.<sup>287</sup> When one compares this to his view of Spender, we can see that there is no suspicion here of Owen taking advantage of the situation, or of borrowing an unfamiliar language in order to disguise himself as one of the men whose suffering he portrays. Arguably, one could accuse Thomas of a reductive empiricism, of demanding such a precise identification of author and subject as to render any work on any subject not directly experienced, no matter how insightful or sympathetic, as ‘pseudo-poetic’, dishonest or disingenuous. That Owen escapes criticism for his war poems is, however, more a result of his creative, and highly effective, use of language, as well as his technical experimentalism, than for any hard-won realism. The suspicion remains, however, that Thomas was possessed of a singularly unforgiving view of those who wrote about circumstances which they had not directly faced.

In ‘Poets on Poetry’ (1946) Thomas makes the claim that ‘poetry [...] can be [the poet’s] attempt at an expression of the summit of man’s experience on this very peculiar and, in 1946,

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<sup>284</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 98.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.



this apparently hell-bent earth,<sup>288</sup> once again using a response to war as means of locating the importance of poetry in society. ‘Poets on Poetry’ was a scripted conversation between Thomas and James Stephens, with an interviewer providing prompts. Aside from Thomas’s obvious annoyance at the levity of Stephens (Thomas at one point remarking, ‘The younger generation used to be called, by their elders, flippant. Not any longer. It’s we, now, who deprecate their flippancy’),<sup>289</sup> it is Thomas’s reaction to what he terms ‘an inverted snobbery – and a suggestion of bad logic – in being proud of the fact that one’s poems sell very badly’<sup>290</sup> that stands out as revealing Thomas’s attitude to the place of the poet within society. He continues, ‘[...] contempt for the public [...] is contempt for the profound usefulness of your own craft’, and it is this insistence on ‘usefulness’, on the poet’s ‘attempt at an expression of the summit of man’s experience’ that differentiates his tone from that of Stephens, who is content on this occasion to close with a comment he had made to Yeats that “‘There was [...] one marvellous year in which I knocked fifteen shillings out of my fellow man’”.<sup>291</sup> It is clear from many of the broadcasts that Thomas wished to make art both productive and approachable, so his language here, alluding to ‘snobbery’, ‘contempt for the public’ and ‘the profound usefulness’ of poetic ‘craft’, shows Thomas on the one hand arguing against poetry as a privileged medium, and on the other asserting the great value of that medium towards the good of society. Just as with Owen, this duality revolves around the personality of the poet, whose ‘profound usefulness’ is predicated on expressing the grand achievements and concerns of society as a whole even as the personality of the author is wholly obscured. Contempt and snobbery are, therefore, impediments to the quality of a poet’s writing, as it detaches the poet from the very people who make their art ‘profound’ and define it as useful.

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<sup>288</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 62.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

Snobbery is mentioned in a number of Thomas's radio works and interviews, for example here, in 'Swansea and the Arts' (1949), in which Thomas describes artists who move away from Wales and who subsequently 'anglicise themselves beyond all recognition':

By the condescending telling of comic apocryphal tales about Dai and Evan from the Valleys, they earn, in the company of cultural lickspittles who condescend to them in their turn, sorry dinners and rounds of flat drinks. [...] And they return home, every long now and then, like slummers, airily to treat and backslap their grooved old friends, to enquire, half-laughingly, the whereabouts of streets and buildings as though they did not know them in the deepest dark, to drag [out of their friends], with all the magnets of their snobbery, the christian [sic] names and numbers of the wives of aged painters, [...] and to jingle in their pockets and mouths their foreign-made pennies, opinions, and intonations.<sup>292</sup>

In this brief rebuke, Thomas conflates a number of criticisms into a single overarching parody of the artist in self-imposed exile: reinforcing cultural stereotypes as a means of ingratiation; denial of their origins; subsequent exploitation of their origins; and a clear sense of superiority gained from having escaped these origins. Indeed, Thomas views this type of artist as exploitative for both the way in which they ridicule their cultural heritage, and by their subsequent return to 'the Valleys' in search of benefactors in the form of 'the wives of aged painters'. Yet Thomas also implies that they are part of a wider economic system, one which does reward with 'sorry dinners' and sycophancy (in the form of 'cultural lickspittles') these kinds of tales, but only by 'condescend[ing] to [the artist] in their turn', an arrangement which can be sought out by the artist 'with all the magnets of their snobbery': in other words, by pursuing the wealthy at the expense of 'old friends'. That these artists 'jingle in their pockets and mouths their foreign-made pennies, opinions, and intonations' suggests that Thomas viewed this process as having an alienating and transformative effect, linking the financial rewards of being a part of this system with the loss of both individuality and cultural identity.

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<sup>292</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), pp. 219 – 220.

Unlike the ‘useful’ poet, the apocryphal writer here shows nothing but contempt for his audience, and is in turn treated with similar disdain.

Thomas himself has been criticised for the very failings he highlights above, for essentially creating a series of Welsh caricatures with which to amuse the English and the Americans. Kingsley Amis, for example, described Thomas as ‘a pernicious figure, one who has helped to get Wales and Welsh poetry a bad name and generally done lasting harm to both’.<sup>293</sup> Indeed, in later years Thomas may have admitted to becoming the very type of artist he pillories in ‘Swansea and the Arts’. Certainly, in ‘A Visit to America’ (broadcast in 1953), Thomas laments the ‘exhibitionists, polemicists, histrionic publicists [...] and, I am afraid, fat poets with slim volumes’ who ‘stream and sing for its heady supper’ across the States (recalling, perhaps, the ‘sorry dinners’ mentioned before).<sup>294</sup> His self-deprecation continues later in the piece when he speaks of ‘the foreign poets, catarrhal troubadours, lyrical one-night-standers, dollar-mad nightingales, remittance-bards from at home, myself among them booming with the worst’.<sup>295</sup> In each case, it is the poetic voice that is singled out as being somehow diminished by the lecture tour, either by becoming ‘catarrhal’ or ‘booming’ (and therefore distorted), or by being commodified, its value diminished.

In a similar vein to ‘Swansea and the Arts’, Thomas depicts the process as one driven by commercialism, describing the lecture tour circuit as ‘remunerative doom in the great State

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<sup>293</sup> Quoted in George Tremlett, *Dylan Thomas: In the Mercy of his Means* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1992), p. xxxvii. Even readers of Thomas have been criticised for falling into the trap of longing for a caricatured Wales. For example, Terence Hawkes wrote in 1959:

‘[Thomas’s] pages are simpered over by the lovers of “beautiful words”, the image-bibbers, the Rhiwbina romantics and Sketty scholars who know poetry is somehow connected with magic, and the streets of South Wales ring nightly to the (beautifully sung) extempore verses of poets going home from the pit’.

(James A. Davies, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 276.)

<sup>294</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), pp. 274 – 275.

<sup>295</sup> According to Harvey Breit, editor of *New York Times Book Review*, Thomas referred to himself during an informal interview as a ‘dollar-made [sic] nightingale’ in a moment of obvious discontent during his first American tour. (Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), p. 284).

University factories’,<sup>296</sup> and, recalling the ‘cultural lickspittles’ of before, asserts the fatuousness of the exercise:

Of the lecture he remembers little but the applause and maybe two questions: ‘Is it true that the young English intellectuals are *really* psychological?’ or, ‘I always carry Kierkegaard in my pocket. Who do you carry?’<sup>297</sup>

‘A Visit to America’ reveals what Thomas seems to have viewed as a complicity inherent in marketing ‘culture’, how the ‘foreign poets’ conspired with ‘great State University factories’ in commercialising knowledge and creating a quasi-intellectual niche market to meet the demands of what he called ‘an earnest crew-cut platoon of giant collegiates, all chasing the butterfly culture’.<sup>298</sup> The two questions he is asked about ‘psychological’ poets and Kierkegaard belie the ‘butterfly’ nature of the society he is pillorying, suggesting that the exercise is less a matter of connoisseurship and learning, but rather a particularly pretentious form of kleptomania, one suited to name-dropping and misinterpretation.

Aside from his criticism of the universities, Thomas also mentions the ‘rich minked chunks of American matronhood’ to whom ‘brassy-bossy men-women’ from Britain

talk [...] about the iniquity of the English Health Service, the criminal sloth of the miners, the *visible* tail and horns of Mr Aneurin Bevan, and the fear of everyone in England to go out alone at night.<sup>299</sup>

It is clear from this that Thomas is singling out neither America nor the lecture circuit *per se*, but is instead mocking the intellectual credibility of the dilettantes who view knowledge as a commodity (who seek to acquire it without discernment) and those who travel far and wide to spread little more than a narrow world view. For example, he remarks on the despondency with which the visitor finds ‘that an audience will receive a lantern-lecture on, say, ceramics, with

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<sup>296</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 277.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

the same uninhibited enthusiasm that it accorded the very week before to a paper on the Modern Turkish Novel,<sup>300</sup> as if the pedagogical qualities of their addresses are negated by the uncritical, ‘uninhibited’ nature of their hosts and their desire to expand their cultural butterfly collection. For Thomas, this inevitably results in feelings of isolation and inertia, the nadir of his ‘remunerative doom’.

Thomas’s references to the National Health Service, which was only in its fifth year of operation when this talk was broadcast, the ‘criminal sloth of the miners’, and Aneurin Bevan (who was himself the son of a miner), all serve to highlight aspects of class division in Britain of particular significance to listeners at the time. Indeed, few figures could be said to have divided Conservative and Labour voters as much as Bevan, who had famously remarked of the former party that ‘[s]o far as I am concerned they are lower than vermin’.<sup>301</sup> That Bevan was, and remains,<sup>302</sup> a popular figure in Wales is as much down to the creation of the NHS as for his roots there, and in this pastiche of what Thomas calls “self-announced [...] ‘ordinary British housewives’” he brings together three of the most potent images of the divide between the labour movement and Conservatism at the time. It is evidently far from incidental that Thomas should suggest a degree of extremism, even hysteria, in the views of the ‘brassy-bossy men-women’ (such as the ‘*visible* tail and horns’ of Bevan),<sup>303</sup> and again this suggests an underlying Socialist tendency on the part of Thomas, one which he expresses with sufficient humour, and in amongst such repeated self-deprecation, that the broadcast avoids becoming one riddled with partisan political satire. Nonetheless, ‘A Visit to America’ is in many ways less about the country and more about the capitalism for which it is either famed or denigrated, as well as the

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<sup>300</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 274.

<sup>301</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945 – 51* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2007), p. 284.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 558.

<sup>303</sup> Cf. ‘Aneurin Bevan once said that Tories did not have horns growing out of their heads; politics would be simpler if they did.’ (Gwyn A. Williams, *The Welsh in their History* (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1982), p. 137.)

nature of knowledge within such an economic framework, noticeable in Thomas's disparaging remarks on the university sector.

The lecture tour as described here is the antithesis of what Thomas was hoping to achieve with his broadcasts. Whereas the audiences in America (and, no doubt, elsewhere) were comfortable, even eager, to pursue 'the butterfly culture' with zeal, Thomas clearly felt that in order to break down barriers to knowledge he would also have to show how poetry was not just a reaction to society, but very much a part of it. So, when discussing apparent changes in poetry since the Georgian period with the poet Edward Shanks in 1946 ('What Has Happened to English Poetry?'), Thomas comments on a widespread misconception regarding verse. He remarks that '[p]eople very often talk about poetry as though it's only something that you read in books, it's just a matter of words put down in certain order, usually bad, on sheets of paper' but counters this with the claim that poetry is in fact 'produced with a great deal of trouble by ordinary human beings who alter as the society in the circumstances under which they live – as that alters so they do'.<sup>304</sup> Thomas is here engaging in a historical materialist reading of the production of poetry,<sup>305</sup> a process of examination Lukács described as one which 'permits us to view the present historically [...] so that we can penetrate beneath the surface and perceive the profounder historical forces which in reality control events'.<sup>306</sup> This is then, in a sense, a political gesture by Thomas, one which locates the poet firmly within society and within a common or even communal history, and shows Thomas rejecting the notion of the poet – specifically in terms of his ideology and his inspiration – as operating apart from, or outside of, its influence. This is indicated by Thomas's pointed insistence on poets as 'ordinary

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<sup>304</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 129.

<sup>305</sup> When addressing the Congress of Writers in Czechoslovakia in 1949, Thomas said of a film about the Velvet Revolution that '[t]he faces in the crowd reveal the delight and pride that your people took in the birth of the new People's Republic, the beauty of simple people, proud and joyful, with the rhythm of history visible in every gesture,' a statement indicative of his understanding of viewing 'the present historically'. Jack Lindsay, *Meetings with Poets* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1968), p. 37.

<sup>306</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin Press, 1990), p. 224.

human beings', as if directly challenging any preconceived fear of literary elitism or intellectualist superiority on the part of the listener, coming as it does early on in the debate. Moreover, that he speaks of poetry as being 'produced with a great deal of trouble' reveals a self-conscious need to defend the assiduous, industrious nature of his work, but in terms more mundane than any pretentious clichés regarding divine inspiration or muses. To Thomas, writing poetry is hard work, and the efforts of the poet should therefore be addressed using a common vernacular indistinguishable from that used to discuss any form of labour. He is, in effect, normalising the act and establishing a direct social and historical relationship between poetry and all of society.

Furthermore, for Thomas poets are, amongst others things, 'concerned with how everybody feels inside themselves' and 'seeking to interpret the spirit of the people as they feel it themselves'.<sup>307</sup> This refinement, even clarification, of his view of the poet's role within the general population is critical to the development of an understanding *of society by society* ('the spirit of the people as they feel it themselves'), or as he expresses it in 'The Poet and his Critic':

When a poet is not working at his poetry, he is like everybody else, only more so. When he *is* working at his poetry, he is, at his highest level, trying to write from everybody to everybody.<sup>308</sup>

The poet's work is, therefore, an attempt to foster self-awareness in 'everybody', the poet's endeavour to understand himself and others being the means by which this greater level of consciousness is created. Writing in 1934, Thomas expressed his frustration with the failings of this exchange between art and society in the most hostile of terms:

And as for the Workers! People have been trying to write to them for years. And they still don't care a damn. The trouble is that in attempting to write for the Workers one generally writes *down*. The thing to do is to bring the Workers *up* to what one is writing.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 132.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>309</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), pp. 141 – 142.

Overcoming intellectual inequality between classes is one way in which to make art useful. Thomas had commented in another letter that ‘what is required is not a bloody revolution but an intellectual one’<sup>310</sup> and when we view these two statements together, one full of anger at the failings of previous generations of writers to ‘bring the Workers *up*’ and the other calling for an ‘intellectual’ revolution (both statements were made in the same year, 1934), it is possible to view Thomas as actively engaging with the avowedly political milieu of writing at this time (whilst perhaps also rebuking it for not going far enough).

Indeed, although Thomas clearly felt that previous attempts to write ‘to the workers’ had proved inadequate, he still maintained hope that, by moving away from a patronising tone (from writing ‘*down*’) and instead engaging in a pedagogical process driven by literature, they would ‘care a damn’ after all. This is hardly surprising when one considers that the approach of Marxists at the time (and Thomas’s language here is quintessentially Marxist) was fundamentally scientific and firmly grounded in the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.<sup>311</sup> Thomas’s approach, on the other hand, especially during the period in which he was writing the radio scripts, was founded on the need for lucidity. This can be seen in his contribution to a meeting of the Authors World Peace Appeal in 1950. Jack Lindsay reports that ‘[a]t the meeting he had by far the most to say, arguing over every sentence of the Appeal and insisting that we must try as much as was humanly possible to get away from committee-jargon and make emotionally-direct statements’.<sup>312</sup> As Golightly notes, ‘Thomas was an effective political worker when he chose to be,’<sup>313</sup> and it is apparent that in many of Thomas’s radio broadcasts, lucidity is paramount in achieving effective political discourse.

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<sup>310</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 185.

<sup>311</sup> Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 194.

<sup>312</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Meetings with Poets* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1968), p. 38.

<sup>313</sup> Victor Golightly, ‘“Writing in dreams and blood”: Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea’, *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 67-91 (p. 73).



Thomas's insistence, therefore, on poets as 'ordinary human beings', as well as his accusation that poetry is 'made by many people, unnecessarily, and trivially, difficult,' both tally with his insistence on 'emotionally-direct statements', his approach to art dovetailing his approach to politics. Indeed, Thomas made a direct political gesture to this end when he expressed his desire to join, amongst others, George Barker, Jack Lindsay and Edith Sitwell in a series of publications called 'Key Poets', with its aim of 'breaking down the barriers between poet and audience, and giving poetry a chance to re-discover itself as activity'.<sup>314</sup> This all points to Thomas being a writer who was conscious of the failings of literature and politics to find a suitable language, one neither patronising nor full of 'committee-jargon', which would articulate a unifying central message (political and/or artistic) and bridge the gap between those making the statement and those for whom it was intended, which in the case of the radio broadcasts was the audience at home.

Like many of his contemporaries, Thomas was, in contrast to the leading lights of the 1930s, the product of a fairly regular secondary school education, and there is much in Thomas's correspondence that suggests a rejection of public school educated writers who turned to Socialism. In 1935 he complained of 'the pseudo-revolutionaries [...] born in fairly wealthy middle-class or upper middle class homes, educated at expensive prep schools, public schools, and universities';<sup>315</sup> whilst in 1938 he wrote that 'I don't know Auden, but I think he sounds bad: the heavy, jocular prefect, the boy bushranger, the school wag, the 6<sup>th</sup> form debater [...]'.<sup>316</sup> These views would find a sympathetic audience amongst the artists of Fitzrovia. As Sinclair notes:

[Paul] Potts was one of those who was aware of the revolt against class amongst the new Fitzrovians. In his praise of George Barker and David Gascoyne and Dylan Thomas, he pointed out that they were all products of suburban secondary schools unlike the public schoolboys of the Auden group. [...] It was a point of view supported by Henry Reed, who saw the

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<sup>314</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Meetings with Poets* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1968), pp. 35 – 36.

<sup>315</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 212.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

rebels against the Auden group in almost a dialectic process ‘against the politically-conscious, over-intellectual writers of the early ’thirties’.<sup>317</sup>

Although I would question whether all of Fitzrovia’s writers and artists were so overtly against being ‘politically-conscious’ (recalling that Thomas himself wrote to Henry Treece to criticise Treece for making a similar remark about his poetry),<sup>318</sup> it is evident that contemporaries of Thomas were disinclined to support the previous cohort of poets whose works dwelt more on the private impact of evolving European polity than on the exigencies of living with the war at home, a contrast brought into an especially sharp focus by Auden’s and Isherwood’s move to America, not to mention the former’s return.<sup>319</sup> Furthermore, there was a feeling amongst the new generation of writers in the 1940s that ‘the members of the *ancien régime* of English culture [...] were hardly helping to restore anyone’s morale but their own,’ a fact which, for those who had consciously avoided active combat during the war such as Thomas, engendered a very real sense of guilt, as well as urgency, in their creative lives ‘as if a Messerschmitt were sitting on their tail’.<sup>320</sup> It is the response to this guilt that will be explored in the next section.

## 2.2 ‘This apparently hell-bent earth’

The vacuum created by a changing attitude to the ‘MacSpaunday’ group, as well the changing views of the group themselves, allowed writers like Thomas to redefine the debate about poetry, as well as to shift attention away from the parables and the men of action of Auden *et al* and back towards life at home, where Fascism, Communism and notions of freedom (political and personal) became a focal point for critique. Thomas expresses this himself when he speaks of poets changing with society (‘as that alters so they do’), and in ‘seeking to interpret the spirit of the people as they feel it themselves’ he is contrasting his own

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<sup>317</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 69.

<sup>318</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 359.

<sup>319</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), pp. 180 – 181.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid*, p. 159.

approach to writing with one view of the Auden group, namely that it ‘could only touch the uneasy conscience of its own class, not of the workers who were claimed as comrades’.<sup>321</sup> Whether this is a fair criticism is debatable, however that it was felt by many of Thomas’s generation is significant, and Thomas himself clearly felt that there was a disparity between ‘the workers’ and these earlier writers, as evidenced by his comments on the ‘pseudo-revolutionaries’ previously mentioned.

For Thomas, as with many of his generation, the most pertinent of the ‘profounder historical forces which in reality control events’ (to recall Lukács) was conflict. As we have seen, economic inequality was also of importance, being part of what was perceived as a larger system of exploitation (or the ‘unnatural system of society’ in Thomas’s words). With regards to conflict specifically, the significance to Thomas of the development of atomic weapons cannot be overstated. References to their apocalyptic potential occur often in his broadcasts, as well as in correspondence and poetry written at the time. Thomas’s lament for ‘this apparently hell-bent earth’ has been mentioned, but other references to ‘the prospect of civilisation itself going for a burton’<sup>322</sup> in ‘A Dearth of Comic Writers’, or to earth as ‘this turning bomb’<sup>323</sup> in ‘The Poet and his Critic’, point to a deeper, unremitting sense of despondency.<sup>324</sup> Indeed, a number of projects begun or conceived in the aftermath of the dropping of atomic weapons use their destructive capabilities as inspiration for a central theme, including a collaboration with

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<sup>321</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 67.

<sup>322</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 193.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>324</sup> In his talk on Wilfred Owen which was broadcasted in 1946 (as distinct from the section in *Welsh Poetry* mentioned before), Thomas is pessimistic about our chances:

[W]hen [...] the audiences of the earth, witnessing what may well be the last act of their own tragedy, insist upon chief actors who are senseless enough to perform a cataclysm, the voice of the poetry of Wilfred Owen speaks to us [...] with terrible new significance and strength. We had not forgotten his poetry, but perhaps we had allowed ourselves to think of it as the voice of one particular time, one place, one war. Now, at the beginning of what, in the future, may never be known to historians as ‘the atomic age’ – for obvious reasons: there may be no historians – we can see [...] he is a poet of all times, all places, and all wars. (*Ibid.*, pp. 94 – 95.)

Stravinsky on an opera depicting the repopulation of the world following a catastrophe (Thomas providing the libretto),<sup>325</sup> and the unfinished poem sequence ‘In Country Heaven’,<sup>326</sup> which Thomas discusses at length in a separate broadcast, ‘Three Poems’. Public awareness of Nazi concentration camps and the use of atom bombs to force Japan’s surrender may undoubtedly have made the world appear ‘hell-bent’. As Sinclair asks, ‘what of science and plans for the future of man, if the only way to victory over Japan in August was the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by two atomic bombs?’<sup>327</sup>

For Thomas, it appears that how this question was answered in the post-war years would be of critical importance. After all, there was a very strong possibility that there would be no future, the world being subject to the ‘powerful insanity of rulers and the apathy or persecution of the innumerable ruled’, as he put it in his 1949 talk on Edward Thomas.<sup>328</sup> To place ‘apathy’ beside ‘persecution’ is to present the listener with a simple dichotomy, a choice between the passive and the active, between submission and struggle. In this instance, an individual must be either one *or* the other ‘of the innumerable ruled’, and so this statement operates as a subtle directive to the listener to understand the notion of ‘rule’ in terms of conflict. This would of course be a familiar stance, reminiscent of much wartime rhetoric, and the idea that apathy could in any way spare an individual the misery of this conflict would, therefore, be greeted with immediate and justified suspicion.

An example of a sustained response to the threat of ‘civilisation itself going for a burton’ comes in one of Thomas’s longer radio plays, ‘The Londoner’. The literary merit of the drama has been understandably questioned,<sup>329</sup> however as a piece of politically informed

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<sup>325</sup> Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography (New Edition)* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 341.

<sup>326</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 259.

<sup>327</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 180.

<sup>328</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 208.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.

drama it has a similar feel to many of the film scripts, being both responsive to contemporary, local issues whilst at the same time looking to the building of the future as an undertaking that could result in considerable social change, if there is sufficient will. It was originally planned to be broadcast to overseas listeners and was first aired in Africa in 1946. Intended to depict the lives of ordinary Londoners in an ordinary London suburb, the narrative retains a sense of urgency for events at home that would, perhaps, have made it better suited to a home audience. Specifically, though, it shows Thomas dramatising the choice between action and apathy mentioned above and incorporates much of the (at times thinly) disguised Socialist rhetoric that Thomas was so fond of in the 1930s and which I alluded to in the introduction.

Taking its lead from Joyce's *Ulysses* and having much in common with Thomas's own *Under Milk Wood*, the drama depicts the lives of the residents of a street in Shepherd's Bush on a single day in what is very clearly a Britain struggling in the aftermath of the end of the Second World War. The work opens and closes with the dreams of the lead characters, Ted and Lily Jackson, and it is Ted, a builder, who remarks on the birth of the atomic age as he and a team of other builders dismantle an air raid shelter:

TED: If a bomb had your name on it, you had it coming and that's all. Atom-bombs got everyruddybody's name on 'em, that's the difference. But there aren't going to be any atom bombs. There can't be. It doesn't make sense. We're not children.

ALFRED: I feel young enough sometimes, on a Saturday night.

TED: No, I mean, *we're* the Government, aren't we. It's we who got to say, 'No, there's not going to be any funny business any more.' And just *see* that there isn't either. If people all over the world say, 'We don't want atom bombs, we want all the things that atomic energy can make not what it can bust up,' then that's how it's going to be.

ALFRED: You shouldn't talk politics when you're working...

TED: If a man can't talk politics when he's got a pneumatic drill in his hand, when can he then...<sup>330</sup>

There are echoes here of 'A City Re-Born', and Jack Clem's comment to camera that "You're the only folk that can make these plans come true." Although not directly addressed to the

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<sup>330</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 82.

listener this time, the inclusive tone of Ted's dialogue and repeated use of 'we' go some way to creating the sense of a relationship between the characters and the audience, notably a working class audience given that the characters are themselves depicted as working class. Exchanging phrases such as 'funny business' for 'conflict' and 'bust up' for 'destroy' similarly ensures that the dialogue has a note of authenticity. The subject matter makes this especially important to both the dramatic and rhetorical success of the dialogue, since Thomas is asking the audience to believe that this quite extraordinary conversation, occurring in a quite extraordinary setting, is being undertaken in a very ordinary way. Indeed, the success of the work as a whole depends on carefully maintaining this balance between the familiar world of contemporary Britain (albeit altered by war) and an imagined future brought about through engagement with the political process. It is as if Thomas is attempting to stir his listeners into action, pre-empting any concept of the worker – it is worth noting that both Ted and Alfred are literally working as they have this exchange – as an apolitical or disenfranchised individual (i.e. one who 'shouldn't talk politics when [they]'re working') by asserting how appropriate it is for someone with 'a pneumatic drill in his hand' to enter into, and attempt to influence, the debate. Moreover, as in 'These Are The Men', Thomas forcefully asserts the global context of this debate, suggesting a need for unity with other countries in countering the terrible potential of atomic weapons. Twice in this section Thomas omits the question mark that a reader (though admittedly not a listener) would expect to find, firstly when Ted asserts that '*we're* the Government, aren't we' and again at the conclusion of the above quote.<sup>331</sup> The implication is that Ted is not asking at all, but very much asserting his own view. In the context of this exchange it is interesting to note that Ted is clearly depicted as the more dominant of the two characters, to the extent that his questions are rhetorical and Alfred's comments are either

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<sup>331</sup> It happens again when Alfred remarks on an errand boy who is enlisted as a commando, saying, 'Funny, isn't it' and in his response to Ted's experience as a prisoner of war when he comments 'Funny when it's so hard to get soap that that's what old Joe puts in the tea, isn't it'. (Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 85).

ignored or swiftly admonished. Ted and Alfred's dialogue ultimately suggests dislocation and disharmony; they speak to one another without ever really conversing, Thomas's altered punctuation implying a breakdown in the fundamentals of conversation between the two characters. In this way, Thomas alludes to their differing levels of engagement with the shaping of their futures and personifies the notion of the 'apathy or persecution of the innumerable ruled'.

The many scenes with Ted and Alfred throughout 'The Londoner' could, when taken as a whole, be read as a crude Marxist parable on society and culture, the birth of the atomic age an occurrence which could trigger social change: it is clearly historically-minded, in that they destroy relics of the past, discuss the conditions of the present, and imagine a material transformation of the future. Ted is overt in his assertion that his occupation is central to his identity ('I'm in the building trade, I used to say to myself, I'm married, I live in Shepherds Bush, I got two kids, I'm not a philosopher [...]),<sup>332</sup> a fact underlined by the symbolic drill he holds throughout the scene quoted above and about which he dreams at the beginning of the play,<sup>333</sup> perhaps alluding to Marx's theory that it is 'not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, [that] their social existence determines their consciousness', a point further reinforced by Ted's experiences as a prisoner of war;<sup>334</sup> Thomas likewise provides an example of the base-superstructure relationship in Alfred's dogmatic response to Ted ('You shouldn't talk politics when you're working...'), which reveals his depoliticised, acquiescent ideology. To quote Williams:

A Marxist theory of culture will recognize diversity and complexity, will take account of continuity within change, will allow for chance and certain autonomies, but, with these reservations, will take the facts of the economic structure and the subsequent social relations as the guiding string on which a culture is woven, and by following which a culture is to be understood.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 85

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>334</sup> Karl Marx, 'Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy' in *Marx and Engels Selected Works*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 181.

<sup>335</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780 – 1950* (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1958), p. 269.

The depiction of Ted and Alfred at work clearly frames the characters in terms of the 'economic structure' within which they live and which defines their social relations. Indeed, the interaction between the two highlights the distinction between a Marxist and, if you will, a non-Marxist view of society. This is particularly apparent in the section in which Alfred recounts his daughter's concern that cinemas will inevitably close when everybody owns a television, meaning that she will have nowhere to 'hold hands' with her boyfriend. Ted's response is that there will 'always be communal places', a reassurance Alfred rejects with: 'My daughter don't want communal places, Ted, she wants to go to the pictures'. Thomas shows Alfred wilfully contradicting himself here, and it was perhaps Thomas's intention to articulate through Alfred resistance, even hostility, to openly Socialist terminology or viewpoints. Whether this is the case or not, Alfred clings to the objective materiality of the cinema in spite of his acknowledgement that it is the subjective 'communal' aspect of the cinema space that his daughter does not wish to lose, providing a further example of the dislocation between the two characters mentioned above. In this respect, Thomas is pointing to a specific change in social relations resulting from the growing popularity of television, as well as continuity within this change, as evidenced by the 'communal places' Ted is so sure will always exist and which Alfred's daughter suggests will consistently be required.<sup>336</sup>

The discussion continues with Ted recalling a former 'shopwalker' at a department store who, as a result of a wound he received whilst fighting (a bayonet scar across his face), would be unlikely to be accepted back into his job assisting customers. Thomas implies that consumerism is incompatible with disfigurement, no matter what might lie behind the injury.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), pp. 84-85.

<sup>337</sup> The anxiety of the 'shopwalker' is described by Ted as follows: 'No shops for him again: he was one of the toughest fellows I ever saw ... he used to sit there half the day, just staring, and moving his great torn fingers just like *this* ... as though he were trying to strangle something ...'. The impotence of the character is expressed by Thomas as an aggressive grappling with nothing, an action (or inaction) which can be read as indicative of a sense of impotence and helplessness. (Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 85).



Thomas follows this with Ted recounting his time as a prisoner of war, which Alfred is reluctant to discuss. It is interesting to note Thomas's development of the character of Alfred, from his dismissive reaction to any mention of 'communal spaces' to his apparent unwillingness to consider Ted's imprisonment. His response to Ted's recollection, in which Ted states that for two of the three years he was a prisoner he spent 'two years thinking', is both nugatory and evasive: 'Funny when it's so hard to get soap that that's what old Joe puts in the tea, isn't it. That's what it tastes like...'<sup>338</sup> This echoes an aside Alfred makes shortly after upbraiding Ted for mentioning 'communal spaces' when he remarks that his daughter is seeing another former prisoner of war 'who used to be errand boy for Wilson's and the next we heard of him he was a commando. Funny, isn't it?'.<sup>339</sup> On both occasions, it is Alfred's reluctance to engage with the practices and after-effects of war that dictate his dialogue, Thomas contrasting Alfred's appreciable disinclination with Ted's more positive, forceful attitude. Alfred is clearly suspicious of an errand boy becoming a commando (a suspicion which would be confirmed by the errand boy's subsequent capture), but he lacks the will or the knowledge to question it further. Again, Thomas is highlighting the different attitudes of Ted and Alfred, one who spent 'two years thinking' about his experience, the other who dismisses this, and anything else politically challenging, as 'funny'.

In a similar manner to 'A City Re-Born', by speaking through a character with a working-class – in this case London – accent, Thomas is adopting a colloquialism and manner distinct from the perceived voice of authority and in doing so dramatising the very real possibility of a war-weary working-class becoming active agents in defining the post-war world. Indeed, a definable voice for the community is emphasised by Thomas at the beginning of the work by utilising a dialogical technique he would use again in *Under Milk Wood*, namely

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<sup>338</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 85.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*

juxtaposing an anonymous, authoritarian voice with that of a local resident. In the case of *Under Milk Wood*, it is the dismissive ‘Voice of a Guide-Book’ which is contrasted with the more sympathetic Rev. Eli Jenkins, but here it is the ‘Voice of an Expert’ which is upbraided by the ‘Voice of an Old Resident’, the former lamenting the ‘[u]gly, inconvenient, and infinitely depressing’ street, the latter claiming, “No, no. You got it all wrong. It’s a nice, lively street.”<sup>340</sup> Here Thomas is articulating a latent disconnection between the middle class and the working class, the white and the blue collar, so to speak (the reference to the street being ‘inconvenient’ revealing the commuter mentality Thomas is satirising in the Voice of an Expert). The anonymous, omniscient Narrator (a part played by Thomas himself when the radio play was broadcast) supports the resident’s view of a ‘nice, lively street’ when he remarks on one of the character’s requests to borrow some salt. He says:

NARRATOR: Of course they don’t mind in the kitchens of Montrose Street ... sharing and sharing alike with bits of things ... with keeping an eye on the children ... with trying to keep life friendly and straight. They’re women working together [...]

By establishing that the narrator is a sympathetic witness to the very ordinary scenes being played out in ‘The Londoner’, Thomas is offering an authorial, ersatz-authoritarian credibility to that which he is presenting as fiction but which has the verisimilitude of reality, being based in the very real Shepherds Bush. He is also recalling the stoic resistance which epitomised the war effort at home with phrases such as ‘trying to keep life friendly and straight’. In this way, Thomas establishes a narrative theme which attempts to capture ‘the spirit of the people’ in a manner which is devoid of obvious criticism and which recalls recent experience. This subtle reassurance to the listener, more specifically to a working class listener, comes just before Ted’s remarks on atomic weapons quoted above. It frames the piece as being on the side of the working class at the very moment Thomas seeks to stir it into action.

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<sup>340</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 76.

Thomas's insistence on the efforts of Montrose Street residents to 'keep life friendly and straight' suggests an almost utopian reading of the working class, but this should be viewed, I think, as a response to the dystopia of a society visibly and psychology marked by global conflict for the preceding six years. It is also an attempt by Thomas to access the spirit of cooperation which had been fostered throughout this period. Idioms such as 'sharing and sharing alike' can therefore be read as the expression of an apolitical socialism imbued with a revolutionary potential, as articulated by Ted when he claims "we're the Government, aren't we." The character of Ted is interesting not only for the spirit of direct action he brings to an otherwise distinctly domestic drama, but also for the way in which Thomas accounts for his militant stance. When asked how long he'd been a prisoner of war, Ted's reply is 'Three years. One year on my back, flat out, and two years thinking', and although Thomas never explicitly states what Ted was thinking about, he does offer the following:

Ted: I used to think about things I didn't *know* I knew ... things used to come into my head that I knew I wasn't clever enough to think ... but they came alright. I'm in the building trade, I used to say to myself, I'm married, I live in Shepherds Bush, I got two kids, I'm not a philosopher, I used to say ... I'm a Londoner, I am ...<sup>341</sup>

Ted represents a burgeoning awareness of his place within the world, a class-consciousness gained through 'two years thinking'. He is driven by his experience as a prisoner of war to reject militarisation and he is insistent on the place of the people within the workings of government – that the people are, in action and desire, the government itself. He is emblematic of a generation damaged by war, so in his dream, which is our first introduction to Ted, and which is written in a 'stream of consciousness' style similar to that of Molly Bloom's, he thinks 'why am I lying here in the rain behind the barbed wire ... there's a single drop of blood on Lily's photo'.<sup>342</sup> These two thoughts, which disturb an otherwise enjoyable dream, reveal the

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<sup>341</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 85.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

lasting effects of war on the character, and show how, so soon after the event, experience of conflict still scars the psyche of people returning to their pre-war lives. For Ted's wife, Lily, it is the loss of her husband for those three years that haunts her. Lily's own dream, in which she's dancing in a palace, concludes with 'Where's Ted ... where's Ted?', the sense of celebration she feels (comparing the scene to 'victory night') disrupted by her fear of loss.<sup>343</sup> Together with the future of the shopwalker on his return to civilian life and the adolescent concerns of Alfred's daughter, 'The Londoner' is a radio play subtly marked by uncertainty and trauma.

Ted defines his identity by his occupation, his family, and his location, stressing repeatedly that he is 'a Londoner' and thereby denoting himself as the main subject of the work, as the eponymous Londoner of the piece. He twice asserts that he is 'not a philosopher', once towards the middle and again at the end of the radio drama, and there is, in his dialogue and deeds, more of a sense of Ted as a dynamic participant in the world than of a passive thinker – one of the “conscious agents” of the emancipatory process [and] “conscious shapers” of history’ much admired by Communists at the time<sup>344</sup> – having spent those two years doing little else but thinking. At the start of the play, an anonymous character named in the script only as ‘Questioner’ asks about Ted, Alfred responding by describing him as ‘about average height, he’s got kind of darkish brown hair [...] and kind of ordinary brownish eyes as far as I can remember,’<sup>345</sup> a description which clearly posits Ted as an everyman character, indistinguishable by any dint of exceptionality from the majority of the population (he is quite forgettable, in fact). However, his job demolishing air raid shelters is clearly as much symbolic as it is pragmatic, and occasional references to his political leanings suggest that Ted feels himself a part of a political movement, albeit in feeling if not in direct affiliation. So, when he

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<sup>343</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), pp. 77-78.

<sup>344</sup> Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 49.

<sup>345</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 77.

comments that ‘I used to try to get Moscow and South America’<sup>346</sup> on the wireless sets that he made and then subsequently dismantled, there is little doubt as to the allusion.

Moreover, when he concludes that ‘[t]here was some point pulling them [the wireless sets] to bits and starting again’,<sup>347</sup> Thomas is foregrounding a second comment on the need to rebuild society which Ted makes shortly after:

Ted: Hope we all learned something new now. Knock all the shelters and pillboxes to bits, and start all over again. But not to build new shelters. We’ve had enough of that.<sup>348</sup>

In Ted, Thomas depicts an average individual whose sense of identity within a community crystallises around the rejection of a system that actively pursues policies of aggression. He is an embodiment of a desire to rebuild society in a way which would remove all traces of its aggressive past and would possess a government which was constituted of, and representative of, the people. His private struggle is waged at a very local level, trying to convince friends and colleagues of their role in rebuilding society and demanding from them the same kind of self-awareness which he feels he has achieved (as Ted remarks, “[w]e’re not children”). He is emblematic of a desire expressed elsewhere in Thomas’s works, such as in ‘These Are The Men’, ‘A City Re-Born’ and ‘New Towns for Old’, for the workers to shape the new, post-war world, to form it in a way which emphasises the need for peace and unity as a direct response to the bloodshed of the first half of the twentieth century.

### 2.3 ‘The rich are rich’

Unlike ‘The Londoner’, which assumes an optimistic, activist tone and contains many jokes to lighten the mood, ‘Persian Oil’, written four years later, is a far more despondent, yet far more aggressive piece of writing. One of the consistent characteristics of Thomas’s radio

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<sup>346</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 81.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

work is the way in which humour is used to contrast the more serious moments in his writing, but in 'Persian Oil' humour is replaced with scorn and undisguised disgust at the conditions in which people live as a result of what Thomas clearly viewed as exploitation. It is a short piece, a monologue, but one that is notable for the way in which Thomas turns his skills as a writer so acutely to the task of describing the poverty, as well as the revolutionary potential, he witnessed when he went to Iran in January, 1951. In some respects, it is Thomas's own *Road to Wigan Pier*.

One of the most surprising aspects of the script is that it came out of an idea, subsequently abandoned, to write a film for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, who had previously opened an oil refinery in Skewen (just outside of Swansea) which had helped to rejuvenate the area.<sup>349</sup> That Thomas should deliver the makings of a script which is so openly critical of the activities of the oil industry seems wilfully at odds with his commission and, unsurprisingly, as a result of his stance no film was made (this in stark contrast to his film work for ICI). The broadcast begins with a description of the deserts around the Abadan Refinery as 'that hot and hateful bone-dry blistering bank' and proceeds from there to describe the town of Abadan equally unfavourably as 'streamlined and reeking new'.<sup>350</sup> Both of these sketches depict a morbid environment, one that is indicative of barrenness ('bone-dry') at the outskirts, whilst possessed of a contradictory 'reeking' newness in the centre, as if already in the grips of decay. Thomas speaks of the '[s]ad, homeless men' and of a 'weight of longing, under the sky on fire' which 'could press the town into the dhowed Gulf'.<sup>351</sup> This 'longing' is developed by Thomas in a series of vignettes that, far from celebrating the advances made in the living

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<sup>349</sup> Victor Paananen, 'The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 46-66 (p. 56).

<sup>350</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 242.

<sup>351</sup> A 'dhow' is a type of rig used in the Arabian sea.

conditions of the locals as a result of the emergent oil refining activity, reveal how divided society is in spite, and sometimes because, of its presence ‘under the sky on fire’.

The first of these scenes is in ‘the old Persia’ where ‘the bazaars smell of carpets and incense and poverty’. It continues:

Women with only their eyes showing through tattered, dirty, mud-trailing, thin, black sack-wraps, on splayed and rotting high-heeled shoes, slip-slop through the open-sewered streets. They do not wear their churdahs [sic] because they are patriotic and believe in the memory of Razah Shah; they wear them because they hide their poverty. Inside these wraps, they clutch their poverty to them; it is their only possession.<sup>352</sup>

Thomas’s tone displays a mixture of pity and aversion. The assonantal and alliterative description of the women’s clothes (‘tattered, dirty, mud-trailing’, and ‘black sack-wraps’) is reflected in the equally assonantal ‘open-sewered streets’, linking the two into a single representation of deprivation, the former figuratively as well as literally absorbing the latter. However, Thomas goes further than to merely hint at this deprivation, and asserts the dominance of the economic over the emotional in the way the women wear their wraps not out of patriotism but ‘because they hide their poverty’. The paradoxical conclusion, in which they ‘clutch’ the poverty that is ‘their only possession’ is a striking piece of rhetoric that leaves little doubt regarding the impoverished existence of the women he saw, nor their dignified attempts at disguising it.

Thomas follows this description of one example of poverty with another, in which he recounts his visit to the children’s ward of a hospital in Tehran. There he sees ‘children suffering from starvation; their eyes were enormous, seeing everything and nothing, their bellies bloated, their matchstick arms hung round with blue, wrinkled flesh’.<sup>353</sup> The style is decidedly out of keeping with the majority of Thomas’s work, lacking the flair and verbal dexterity that epitomises much of his writing and which is present in other broadcasts of this

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<sup>352</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), pp. 242 – 243.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

period. One reason for this, perhaps, is that the descriptions of the hospital and of the Persian women appear almost verbatim in two letters Thomas sent to his wife, Caitlin, whilst he was in Persia.<sup>354</sup> By adopting a more direct, epistolary tone, Thomas is impoverishing his own style to reflect the subject, leaving a bare, stripped-down description free of artifice. Indeed, when he comes to juxtapose this sustained depiction of poverty with one of wealth, he says only:

After that, I had lunch with a very rich man, who, of course, lived on the poor. He was charming and cultivated.<sup>355</sup>

There is a restrained, sardonic tone to this rebuke, a tone which appears all the more restrained, all the more deliberate in its understatement, when compared to what he had originally written to Caitlin:

After that, I had lunch with a man worth 30,000,000 pounds, from the rents of peasants all over Iran, & from a thousand crooked deals. A charming, and cultivated, man.<sup>356</sup>

Thomas exchanges irony for meiosis, reducing the incident to a punctilious, absent-minded one-liner. In the broadcast description, Thomas's moderation underpins a rhetorical assuredness which makes the very idea of condemnation utterly unnecessary and renders any hint of bombast incongruous to the whole. So, when he describes children who are 'three-quarter naked, filthy, hungry, beautiful with smiles and great burning eyes and wild hair',<sup>357</sup> who beg at the train stations, he mentions in counterpoint that '[p]hilosophic buzzards wheeled above them'. Similarly, when describing 'prosperous Abadan', he remarks that '[p]eople are there because oil is. Oil is first. Oil is all. People, exiled, come a long way afterwards in this dusty sun-fry'. For Thomas, the situation is exemplified by the presence of a community which

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<sup>354</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), pp. 873 – 875.

<sup>355</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 243.

<sup>356</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 875.

<sup>357</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 243. In describing the children as having 'great burning eyes', Thomas is recalling the story he was told, and which he recounts in the depiction of the hospital, of a child who was crying after suffering severe burns at home whilst her mother went out begging. This process of linking one story of poverty to another ensures a consistently stark message, all the more emphatic for using allusion over direct statement.



‘lives at the end of a pipe-line’,<sup>358</sup> their existence in that location the product of an industry and driven by necessity, their place within the product/labour dynamic distorted so that they are not even of secondary importance to the product, but ‘come a long way afterwards’. The children in the Tehran hospital who see ‘everything and nothing’ and the ‘very rich man who [...] lived on the poor’ continue the theme of contradiction and paradox in ‘Persian Oil’, and these descriptions could, I believe, be read as indicative of an underlying feeling by Thomas that the proximity of such poverty to rich industrial companies was likewise paradoxical, or at least had the feel of a paradox.

Towards the end of Thomas’s monologue, the structure of the work shifts from longer, more realistic narrative descriptions of events, to shorter, pointed, single sentence statements, more akin to poetic imagery and lineation than the language of a reporter:

In the ruins of Persepolis, all is immemorial vanity.  
Hyenas crack their abominable jokes all night.  
Jackals are sorry for being jackals.  
Engineers curse their dehydrated ale in the income-classed clubs.  
The rich are rich. Oil’s oily. And the poor are waiting.<sup>359</sup>

Persepolis, a city destroyed by fire by Alexander the Great as an act of drunken revenge, is used by Thomas to imply that Abadan itself may one day be the site of such destruction, being a part of the ‘immemorial vanity’ which the ruins of the ancient city seem to suggest is an innate feature of the area. The measured, almost cinematic journey from these ruins, across the wild hyenas and the jackals, to the ‘income-classed clubs’ in the residential part of the city, hints at an impending crisis, a crisis which the final words ‘And the poor are waiting’ frame as a politico-economic event. The tautological, almost reductive pragmatism of saying ‘The rich are rich’ and ‘Oil’s oily’ lends a weight of credibility to the final sentence, as if the tension between the rich and the poor (with oil at the centre) is building towards an incident that the

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<sup>358</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 243.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

epiphenomenal scavengers dramatically presage and which would utilise the revolutionary potential that Thomas wished to express. Jack Lindsay recounts how

[Thomas] had just returned from Persia where he had been working on a documentary film. There were upheavals going on in Persia and I said, "Congratulations on starting the revolution." For a moment he was disconcerted, then he gave one of his heaving laughs and expressed the hope that something shattering was really going to happen.<sup>360</sup>

There is no obvious reason to doubt Lindsay's recollection of events, and the final line of the script certainly supports a 'hope that something shattering was really going to happen'. 'Persian Oil', however, is more than an expression of hope. Rather, it is a subdued and moving account of suffering which Thomas links to commercial activity, the proximity of those who inflict the suffering, typified in Thomas's lunch with 'a very rich man,' an additional reason to condemn the system he witnessed, since ignorance of the human effects of the oil industry could afford no excuse.

#### 2.4 "Congratulations on starting the revolution"

Despite being set in Iran, in 'Persian Oil' Thomas used the kind of montage technique that he employed in many other works set closer to home, whereby the audience is confronted with a startling contradiction in standards of welfare between different people living within the same community. So, for example, in 'Memories of Christmas', we see Thomas as a child returning home 'through the desolate poor sea-facing streets where only a few children fumbled with bare red fingers in the thick wheelrutted snow';<sup>361</sup> or in 'Reminiscences of Childhood', where Thomas and his friends pass 'the dockside unemployed' angling for 'unpleasant-tasting fish' from the end of the pier they play on.<sup>362</sup> It is a technique he uses to the greatest effect in

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<sup>360</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Meetings with Poets* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1968), p. 38.

<sup>361</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), pp. 25-26.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

his short stories, but we can see even in these short broadcasts the persistence of poverty in his works, as if the only way to navigate through society, as in his autobiographical works, or to depict society in drama, as in 'The Londoner', is to do so with the 'desolate poor' firmly in mind.

His works on other writers, supplemented by his written criticisms of their works, suggest a dissatisfaction with the way poets presented themselves, with the way they set about their work, and with the way they clung, in spite of everything, to fundamentally elitist, self-preserving tropes and language in order to bring about some kind of convenient revolution. When he rebuked Pudney by writing that 'too many have opened the communal sky to find some celestial Lenin there grinning over the output of the propagandist poets', Thomas wasn't merely critiquing a particularly self-approving vein of literature. He was also asserting what he felt was a justifiable anger at those with the skill and power to act, just as Wilfred Owen had, as 'the *pleader* of the sufferings of men' regardless of how it diminished their own part in the poetry.

### 3. PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG DOG

Thomas's short stories can be divided into two quite distinct categories: there are those that were written before *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940), referred to by various critics as 'the early prose'<sup>363</sup> and the later works, including *Portrait* itself. As James Davies puts it, 'With his fiction as with his poetry, the late 1930s saw Thomas concerned about appropriate style, the shift from difficult, sometimes obscure, stories to the immediately approachable'.<sup>364</sup> Such a clear delineation as this can be made primarily as a consequence of the pronounced lexical and stylistic changes that came about with the publication of *Portrait*, changes prompted by a suggestion in 1936 from Thomas's publisher at Dent, Richard Church, that he write 'a tale of the world where [Thomas's] early years [had] been spent'.<sup>365</sup> It was this proposal – to look both back to the past and outwards to the society around him – that brought about a paradigmatic shift more significant than any other seen in relation to Thomas's output.

The evolutionary step to *Portrait* was taken in *The Map of Love* (1939), a collection of prose and poetry described by one reviewer as 'baffling' and having a 'vision [that] is still excessively subjective'.<sup>366</sup> Indeed, this dearth of objectivity, this wilful surrender to an insularity so absolute that even the language employed is itself mystifyingly idiosyncratic, is what marks it out as so distinct from its successor, a book often praised for the clarity of concept and execution. That *The Map of Love* should bear a name indicative of elucidation whilst being

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<sup>363</sup> 'Thomas's fiction may be divided sharply into two classifications: vigorous fantasies in poetic style, a genre he discontinued after 1939; and straightforward, objective narratives'. (Jacob Korg, *Dylan Thomas* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 154.). Annis Pratt's *Dylan Thomas' Early Prose: A Study in Creative Mythology* is likewise explicit in marking 1939 as the end of the 'early' period (Annis Pratt, *Dylan Thomas' Early Prose: A Study in Creative Mythology* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970, pp. xi-xii). Mayer provides further support for this division, citing Olson, Ackerman and others as being of this view as well (Ann E. Mayer, *Artists in Dylan Thomas' Prose Works: Adam Naming and Aesop Fabling* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), pp. 3-8).

<sup>364</sup> James A. Davies, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 172.

<sup>365</sup> Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography (New Edition)* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 178.

<sup>366</sup> Geoffrey Moore, 'Dylan Thomas', in *Kenyon Review*, Vol. XVII, (Spring 1955), pp. 258-77, quoted in James A. Davies, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 246.

‘excessively subjective’ is perhaps a little ironic, whereas *Portrait*, the title of which might imply introspection, is one of Thomas’s most complete works on the society around him and very much the ‘tale of the world’ to which Church alluded.<sup>367</sup>

Moreover, it is interesting to note that Thomas’s most clearly understood works should refer back to his formative years (during which he was composing much of the complex early prose) in order to describe this society, and it is suggestive of a link between the two creative periods that is actually lost in this division between *early* and *late* periods. The early prose is marked by a fundamental attachment to the notion of the destruction-creation cycle, the destruction often accompanied by a journey, the creation by another journey beginning. A link, therefore, between the early prose and the late can be established between the thematic interests of the early prose and *Portrait*, in which the protagonist’s innocence is lost, only for a new awareness to be created out of this loss. Similarly, the unfinished *Adventures in the Skin Trade* (1941) deals with the steady erosion of a fictionalised ‘Thomas’ in order to be reborn out of the loss of innocence. So what at first appears to be a stylistic schism can instead be viewed as part of an on-going process of renewal, one obscured as much by Thomas’s own commentary on the works as by the obvious change in language.

Despite the intrinsic interest of Thomas’s prose works, the oft cited apologia when approaching these writings critically is the insight they offer into Thomas’s serious work as a poet. Take, for example, Davies in his introduction to *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings*:

There is general agreement with Dylan Thomas’s own judgement concerning the relative position of his writing in prose: on the whole, he came to regard his work in this medium as side-issues from his chief concern with poetry. But a survey of his career shows that in the 1930’s those side-

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<sup>367</sup> An interesting counter-argument to this view comes from Knight: ‘Thomas’s Jarvis stories and their like are, and deserve to be better known as, a powerful Welsh version of literary modernism, a projection of D. H. Lawrence’s interest in a sentient world in a more rigorous and indeed Rimbaud-like form. If not themselves positively a way of writing Wales in English, it is nevertheless clear that their suppression [...] was based on a colonially inspired view of what was interesting from Wales – naive entertainment. It is clear from reading these stories that Dylan Thomas was potentially a major prose writer as well as a great poet, but the complex and often negative relations with England and its publishing market put an end to such a development.’ (Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction: From Colony to Independence* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 124.)

issues were more organically related to the poetry than at any subsequent period.<sup>368</sup>

I would contend that Davies is only partially correct here, and that although a clear stylistic similarity between the poetry and prose is apparent during this period, there are thematic similarities in the later works too, however the prose is less poetic and so the presence of a link between the two is more obscure (again, somewhat ironically given Thomas's apparent move to greater clarity) than in the works of earlier years. Such a link can, however, be found, and it is most clearly visible in Thomas's *Portrait*.

It is for this reason that the attention of this chapter will, by necessity, be directed to exploring *Portrait* alone, rather than the earlier short stories or on works such as *Adventures in the Skin Trade* (1941), *The Beach of Falesá* (1959) or *The Death of the King's Canary* (1976). Moreover, considering the thematic and stylistic similarities that will be discussed between *Portrait* and the film scripts, radio scripts, as well as *Under Milk Wood*, it seems sensible to retain focus at the possible expense of completeness, concentrating instead on where Thomas as a social writer is most clearly in evidence.

### 3.1 Personal But Not Private

*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* was published in April 1940, as Britain found itself embroiled in another world war. Throughout the preceding years, Thomas had vocally opposed the efforts of the British Union of Fascists to gain a foothold in his native Swansea by writing letters to the local newspaper at which he worked.<sup>369</sup> Thomas himself claimed to have been involved in an altercation at one of the meetings they held,<sup>370</sup> however this has been disputed and the evidence suggests that he was more passive-aggressive than perhaps he

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<sup>368</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writing*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. vii.

<sup>369</sup> The newspaper was the *Swansea and West Wales Guardian*. His letters to the editor are as much anti-capitalist as anti-fascist (*Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), pp.169 – 170, 176 – 178).

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid*, p. 173.

wished to imply.<sup>371</sup> It was to his fellow agitator, Bert Trick, that Thomas wrote the most damning rebuke of his literary efforts at this time, in the months before publication of *Portrait*, deprecating, in a style that would become more and more familiar as the years went by, his attempts to broaden his output:

I live from poem to mouth, and both suffer. Now I am trying to complete, by December, a book of short stories, mostly pot-boilers, called, temporarily, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog: stories towards a Provincial Autobiography' [...] they're all about Swansea life, the pubs, clubs, billiard saloons, promenades, adolescence in the suburban nights, friendships, tempers, and humiliations.<sup>372</sup>

The phrase 'mostly pot-boilers' has become synonymous with the collection, and it has been tempting for critics in the past to take Thomas at his word and thereby consign the works to a populist corner of the canon, away from the poetry and distinct from the more challenging earlier stories of, for example, *The Map of Love*.<sup>373</sup> This is understandable, as one can indeed detect a hint of self-deprecation in the dropped explanatory sub-title 'stories towards a Provincial Autobiography', an addition that seems intent on reducing the literary ambitions of the work to a comparatively lowly place in Thomas's oeuvre. Moreover, the playful allusion to Joyce again hints at a lack of seriousness, as if Thomas were deliberately lowering our expectations, even mocking the idea of seriousness, with his collection. However, as we saw with the radio talks he gave on other writers, this seems to have been Thomas's manner, and deliberately eschewing any charge of overt formality or obvious elitism was very much in keeping with his approach to literature. Thomas himself noted the influence of Joyce on subsequent authors, whilst insisting all the same, 'I do not think that Joyce has had any hand at all in my writing; certainly *Ulysses* has not. On the other hand, I cannot deny that the shaping

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<sup>371</sup> *Dylan Remembered – Vol. 1, 1914 – 1934*, ed. by David N. Thomas (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press Ltd., 2003), pp. 170 – 173.

<sup>372</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 471.

<sup>373</sup> See Davies quote above, in particular his remark suggesting 'general agreement with Dylan Thomas's own judgement concerning the relative position of his writing in prose'.

of some of my *Portrait* stories might owe something to Joyce's stories in the volume, *Dubliners*'.<sup>374</sup>

This apparent attempt to downplay *Portrait* is not, however, in keeping with the lasting influence of the work on Thomas's style. As mentioned, many critics point towards *Portrait* as significant in as far as it can be said to have marked the birth of a new poetic voice. Whether this was for financial reasons as Annis Pratt notes,<sup>375</sup> or due to an aesthetic drive as Jacob Korg describes it,<sup>376</sup> is uncertain (although the former might more confidently be supported by Thomas's own pronouncements regarding 'pot-boilers', however Pratt herself notes that Vernon Watkins disagreed with this interpretation).<sup>377</sup> Viewed alongside Thomas's poetic output of the time (in particular those collected in *Deaths and Entrances* (1946)), the link between the poetry and the prose becomes more than simply the latter echoing the former. Instead, it suggests a symbiosis between the two forms, that they were, indeed, 'organically related' as Davies put it.

Conflict, in the form of the Second World War, provided the backdrop to the publication of *Portrait*, and Thomas's position (at the beginning of the conflict at least) was relatively neutral. In the same letter to Trick quoted above, he writes, 'I've only my feelings to guide me, & they are my own, and nothing will turn them savage against people with whom I have no quarrel'.<sup>378</sup> This might be called pacifism: in a political sense as a rejection of state-sanctioned violence, and in a private sense as suggested by the use of 'savage'. To be less kind, it might be called indifference, as there is, unashamedly, no attempt to explain his stance beyond his 'feelings' and the absence of a personal 'quarrel' with Nazi Germany or its military.

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<sup>374</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writing*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. 157.

<sup>375</sup> Annis Pratt, *Dylan Thomas' Early Prose: A Study in Creative Mythology* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 32.

<sup>376</sup> Jacob Korg, *Dylan Thomas* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 154.

<sup>377</sup> Annis Pratt, *Dylan Thomas' Early Prose: A Study in Creative Mythology* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 32.

<sup>378</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 471.



This position of neutrality within conflict is, however, seen repeatedly in *Portrait*, being the central motif of a number of the stories and emerging as the key personality trait of its most important characters. This is especially significant for the purposes of understanding the role of society in *Portrait*, as it stems from specific attempts to mediate between apparently opposing groups (rich and poor, mad and sane, young and old) and to prove that ‘nothing will turn [his feelings] savage’.

Where these attempts to mediate are, and are not, successful provides much of the dramatic impetus to the stories, especially where social class is concerned. Specifically, the experiences of the fictionalised Thomas character can be seen to trace his development from socially ambivalent child (‘Patricia, Edith, and Arnold’, ‘The Peaches’) through the early stages of class awareness (‘The Fight’), to fully class-conscious young man (‘Where Tawe Flows’, ‘Old Garbo’, ‘One Warm Saturday’). Alongside this burgeoning self-awareness, a concomitant (and linked) appreciation of society itself develops, and the impression that *Portrait* makes is more suggestive of the abandoned ‘Provincial Autobiography’ subtitle than of an individualised ‘portrait’ of an individual, being more about the characters with whom the fictionalised Thomas interacts than the protagonist himself. Personal conflicts emerge, and it is through these tensions between people (as well as how they are managed and healed) that what we recognise as a society, as a community, emerges.

In 1935, Thomas wrote that poetry was ‘personal but not private, propagating the individual in the mass and the mass in the individual’<sup>379</sup> and it is this process of exchange that Thomas again adheres to in *Portrait*. The character-Thomas’s development as an artist is closely aligned with his development as a socially aware individual, one whose abilities as an artist rely on the intellectual assimilation of the traits and experiences of others and the formation of a critical understanding of them, such that his art might be born out of this

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<sup>379</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 208.

understanding. The character-Thomas's life ('the personal') is social ('not private'), the 'mass' and the 'individual' becoming mutually dependent and practically interchangeable when perceived through Thomas's art. As I said, the overall impression of *Portrait* is social: the stories are clearly not about Thomas, but rather about his grandfather, the woman they call 'Old Garbo', Mr. Farr, Raymond Price, his Aunt Annie, the Welsh middle class, Walter and Tom (the 'Little Dogs'), Patricia, Edith and Arnold, and so on. That Thomas personalises the experiences of these characters and collects them under an ostensibly autobiographical heading is indicative of the propagation of the mass in the individual mentioned by Thomas above, and I will discuss this notion of a social art towards the end of this reading of the work.

As with the film and the radio scripts, poverty and inequality leave their mark upon *Portrait*. Throughout the collection, the spectre of poverty provides the *mise en scène* and, in certain stories, the central narrative theme, with the fictionalised Thomas progressing tentatively through increasingly poor areas towards the dereliction of the slums in 'One Warm Saturday'. Again, these experiences feed into the Thomas character's development as an artist, the derelict residential areas of Swansea becoming the backdrop to some of Thomas's most moving prose and to some of his more direct (at times meta-fictional) statements on the place of the artist within a community. This act of portraying, and thereby recording, neglected areas of his home becomes devotional, his final act as storyteller being to record the plight of the 'small and hardly known and never-to-be-forgotten people of the dirty town' that he has depicted.<sup>380</sup> The act is not, however, exploitative: Thomas's experiences are not recounted with the cautionary zeal of a social reformer, nor with the academic relish of what might nowadays be called a 'slum tourist'. Rather, his assimilation of the mass into the artistic elements of the individual comes at the cost of a diminution of the significance of the character-Thomas to such an extent that his own experience, recorded in his own autobiography, is replaced with

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<sup>380</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 230.

the (again, artistic) desire to preserve the memory of the inhabitants of the slums, the ‘never-to-be-forgotten people’, not himself, an act that Thomas foregrounds in ‘Old Garbo’.

Amongst the critical works published on Thomas’s short stories, one in particular seeks to understand the overarching thematic intent of *Portrait*, namely Ann Mayer’s *Artists in Dylan Thomas’s Prose Works: Adam Naming and Aesop Fabling* (1995). In this study, Mayer proposes that Thomas uses the *Künstlerroman* structure in order to dramatise a dialogue between the older, more developed author-creator and the young, introspective, fictionalised author-protagonist (again, a purely subjective act, as in previous prose works). Mayer further contends that Thomas expresses through the work the desire to ‘heal individuals [...] or to heal rifts in a community’,<sup>381</sup> but I would go further than this and suggest that the act of storytelling, over and above healing (although that’s certainly there, in particular in stories such as ‘Who Do You Wish Was With Us?’ and ‘A Visit to Grandpa’s’) is, as mentioned above, mutually rewarding, that *Portrait* proposes a practical place for the artist within the community so as to heal it, certainly, but also celebrate and critique it, and to become a better artist himself for it. Part of this virtuous circle involves revealing the damaging effects of poverty and class, so is, therefore, also an exercise in dialectical materialism, in which Thomas’s recounting of his own history within the class struggle improves him (as protagonist) morally, philosophically, intellectually and again artistically, thereby fulfilling the tenets of the *Künstlerroman* form, all the while meditating on the effects of poverty and economic change.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Ann E. Mayer, *Artists in Dylan Thomas’ Prose Works: Adam Naming and Aesop Fabling* (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), p. 90.

<sup>382</sup> ‘[...] *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) is specifically a portrait of a writer born of, and not merely into, the Wales of the inter-war years. Indeed, the stories show how the radical displacements that had occurred in Welsh society before and during Dylan Thomas’s day (the language shift; the decline of Nonconformity; the move from rural to urban; the oscillation between a residual awareness of Wales’s cultural distinctiveness and an emergent sense of its English provincialism) could develop in a writer not only a heightened consciousness but also a heightened consciousness of himself as a writer.’ M. Wynn Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures: the two literatures of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 81.

Indeed, one of the most celebrated stories within the collection seeks to portray the social impact of capital on his familial relationships and on his relationships with friends. ‘The Peaches’ sees Thomas as a young child being confronted with the class system and the tensions that arise from it, as evidenced through the anxieties of Thomas’s relative, Aunt Annie, on whose farm the story takes place. The setting is significant, being a semi-fictionalised version of the actual Fernhill<sup>383</sup> on which his Aunt Annie, who was herself immortalised in the poem ‘After the Funeral’, had lived. The place indicates quite clearly the familial link that Thomas had to the countryside, away from his comfortable suburban life in Swansea. Apart from Thomas’s parents (his father was a schoolmaster and English teacher at the Grammar School at which Thomas was himself a student, whilst his mother did not work), the majority of his relatives lived in rural communities outside Swansea. The expansion of railway lines into South Wales in the latter part of the nineteenth century had enabled Thomas’s grandfathers to find work on the Great Western Railway, thereby allowing them (or compelling them, perhaps) to move away from the farming communities of Carmarthenshire and into developing towns such as Swansea, towns that directly benefitted from the new railway lines that his relatives worked on. ‘The Peaches’ sees these two aspects of Thomas’s life (the rural in the form of Thomas’s relatives on the farm, and the suburban as represented by his friend Jack and Jack’s mother, here embodying the working class and the middle class respectively) failing to comfortably coexist. The key moment in the text, in which a valued (even cherished) tin of peaches is rejected by Jack’s mother, Mrs. Williams, marks the moment at which this failure is most apparent:

‘No, no, Mrs Jones, thanks the same,’ she said. ‘I don’t mind pears or chunks, but I can’t bear peaches.’

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<sup>383</sup> Fernhill is the actual name of the farm, rather than ‘Fern Hill’ as Thomas has it in the poem, although in ‘The Peaches’ it is renamed ‘Gorsehill’.

Jack and I had stopped talking. Annie stared down at her gym-shoes. One of the clocks on the mantelpiece coughed, and struck. Mrs Williams struggled from her chair.<sup>384</sup>

In his reading of Thomas's works, Paananen sees 'The Peaches' as 'a story about class consciousness', asserting that, by refusing the peaches, 'Mrs. Williams's son, Jack, and the young Dylan Thomas are, at the end of the story, on opposite sides of the barrier of class,'<sup>385</sup> a sudden separation suggested by the line 'Jack and I had stopped talking' quoted above. This can be read literally (i.e. they no longer conversed) or, more figuratively, to imply that they were no longer on speaking terms. This 'barrier of class', impact with which is announced by the clock striking, is portrayed as a barrier to communication and understanding. Mrs. Williams, insensitive to the offer of the peaches, misses the significance that the gift represents, and her overt rejection ('I can't bear peaches') is itself interpreted as a personal slight rather than a simple indication of preference. Each character is drawn, in their own way, into the drama that the rejected peaches creates. Uncle Jim, for example, expresses his resentment at being confronted with the emotional aspects of class when, drunkenly, he lambasts Mrs. Williams for '[m]aking us small' by suggesting that 'peaches aren't good enough for her'.<sup>386</sup>

Most of the characters are portrayed as falling on one side or the other of the class barrier, Jack's mother representing the middle class, Uncle Jim representing the working class. Aunt Annie attempts to act as mediator between the two, but she fails because her own class anxiety, her insecurities and aspirations, overwhelm her. This anxiety is fuelled by her efforts to fulfil two contradictory roles, as farmer's wife on the one hand, wearing gym-shoes 'which were caked with mud and all holes', and as socialite on the other, in her best dress 'like Sunday'.<sup>387</sup> Her interaction with Mrs. Williams exemplifies this neurosis:

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<sup>384</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 137.

<sup>385</sup> Victor Paananen, 'The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 46-66 (p. 56).

<sup>386</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 141.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

She fussed on before Mrs Williams down the stone passage, darting her head round, clucking, fidgeting, excusing the small house, anxiously tidying her hair with one rough, stubby hand.<sup>388</sup>

Annie is portrayed as an individual struggling with her own class-consciousness, acutely, even painfully, aware of the unspoken divide between herself as a farmer's wife and her guest, a woman who clearly inhabits a more privileged social space: Thomas rather unkindly implies this class anxiety by imbuing Annie with the mannerisms of a chicken, 'darting her head round, clucking [...]'.

Annie's reaction is to adopt a servile role, to become a house maid to her guest and to make apologies for the unsatisfactory surroundings offered by her home. Thomas emphasises this point by having Annie 'tidy' herself as well, and, tellingly enough, she does this 'anxiously'. The 'one rough, stubby hand' with which she fixes her hair is indicative of the manual work she undertakes every day, and there is almost a hint of futility in the gesture of tidying her hair with it. She repeats this action later in the story, when standing in the doorway to greet Mrs. Williams as she comes to collect her son, 'trying to smile and curtsy, tidying her hair, wiping her hands on her pinafore', again going through the neurotic process of 'tidying' herself, including 'wiping her hands' as if they were dirty.<sup>389</sup> Similarly, when the family bible falls to the floor in the 'best room',<sup>390</sup> her reaction is to begin 'dusting it hurriedly with her sleeve'.<sup>391</sup> Annie's self-image is poisoned by class-consciousness and anxieties regarding her social status, anxieties which centre on notions of dirt and disorder, of uncleanness, and when Mrs. Williams later in the story wipes her chair before sitting, she feeds into these anxieties

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<sup>388</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 135.

<sup>389</sup> Cf. Thomas, D. 'After the Funeral':

I know her scrubbed and sour humble hands  
Lie with Religion in their cramp, her threadbare  
Whisper in a damp word [...]

(lines 31 – 33).

<sup>390</sup> Fuller describes this 'best room' as 'that petit-bourgeois sanctum which is kept for those important events in life that rarely happen'. John Fuller 'The Cancered Aunt on her Insanitary Farm' in Walford Davies (ed.) *New Critical Essays*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1972, p. 216.

<sup>391</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 136.

whilst simultaneously revealing that she suffers from them too, albeit from the other side of the barrier of class. The juxtaposition of an anxious working-class woman doing all she can to please her guest, with Mrs. Williams who is, by turns, ungrateful, dismissive and suspicious (not to mention middle class), presents a clear dichotomy, and, by casting Annie in the role of victim, Thomas seems to be inviting sympathy for the former and vilification of the latter. The story is, therefore, more a meditation on the reasons for class struggle than about the struggle itself – a familiar theme throughout *Portrait*.

The character at the centre of the story is, of course, the young Dylan Thomas, and it is worth stating here that, given the *Künstlerroman* form adopted by Thomas for the collection as a whole, he is evidently a developing character, and it is these events, this struggle, that feeds his development. This is most clearly evidenced by his action at the end of the story:

The chauffeur came back. The car drove off, scattering the hens. I ran out of the stable to wave to Jack. He sat still and stiff by his mother's side. I waved my handkerchief.<sup>392</sup>

Again we are presented with a juxtaposition: on the one hand we have the young Jack, 'still and stiff', aping what we can imagine to be his mother's posture, or assuming a pose which Jack anticipates is expected of him, and doing so coldly, without consideration for his friend; and Dylan, waving his handkerchief, continuing a game, playfully (perhaps ignorantly, as if he has failed to understand the gravity of the social situation in which he finds himself) wishing his friend well. Read a certain way, the ending is almost conciliatory, Thomas literally waving the white flag to the side so opposed to his family's own. What this suggests about the young Thomas is that he is not (yet) a victim of class consciousness, that he suffers none of the neurosis by which his aunt is plagued. This implies that the young Thomas does not identify with a class, that he is not even aware that such a notion exists, and, furthermore, that his behaviour should, as a consequence, be modified to account for a presupposed difference

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<sup>392</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 142.

between the wealthy and the poor. He is still developing, and his actions are therefore marked by naiveté, by indifference, almost by callousness.

One other aspect of his behaviour, however, is curiosity, and it is this which Thomas describes at the very beginning of 'The Peaches', when we see the young Thomas abandoned outside of a pub whilst his Uncle Jim goes inside to drink, gamble and flirt with the locals. Thomas, although terrified of the dark and increasingly falling victim to his own imagination, takes refuge in his ability to observe and describe, so when he calls out to his uncle in fear, he does so in a way that will not interfere with his observations, that will not disturb the scene, crying out 'softly so that [his uncle] should not hear'.<sup>393</sup> This capacity of Thomas to detach himself from a situation is significant, as it explains in part his ability to remain unfazed during the fallout at the end of the story. Like Annie, he fails to mediate between the parties on either side of the barrier of class, but he does not seem to care. When he waves his handkerchief, he does so in the knowledge that he will see Jack once he is back home and he again inhabits the comfortable, urban environment in which, if he is not quite on a par with his friend, he is at least part of the same social dynamic, and in this their class unites them and there is a shared understanding of their respective roles. As Davies puts it, '[...] compliance, together with class rather than familial loyalty, is one of the story's themes. The ending makes this clear'.<sup>394</sup>

In order to be so aware of his situation and so comfortable with the repercussions of Jack and Jack's mother's disapproval of his own relatives, Thomas would, consequently, need (like Annie) to be conscious of his social standing. Specifically, he would have to know that he is of Jack's world, not Annie's. Indeed, Thomas portrays his younger self as arguably rather insensitive, the waving of the handkerchief coming shortly after Jack's deliberately misleading

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<sup>393</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 129.

<sup>394</sup> James A. Davies, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 175.



account of his time on the farm (a description that evokes no sense of loyalty from Thomas, and Davies' quote regarding 'compliance' is again relevant here):

'And he called you a bloody cow, and he said he'd whip the hell out of me, and Gwilym took me to the barn in the dark and let mice run over me, and Dylan's a thief, and that old woman's spoilt my jacket.'<sup>395</sup>

Jack makes an accusation against every one of his hosts: personifying Uncle Jim by bad language and violence; making Gwilym sound faintly perverted; Dylan he renders a criminal; and Annie's kindly act of repair is distorted into an act of destruction. All of this is feverishly recounted to a seemingly disinterested mother before they even reach the car. Thomas notes that he hears Jack say all of this, but, as mentioned above, he still waves his handkerchief.<sup>396</sup> Jack does this because, much like his mother, his class (and his place within it) is a comfort to him, so, rather than admit to having spent a pleasant day playing with his friend on a farm, he instead recounts his discomfort in the environment, one typified by its inhabitants. He is committing himself to his class through the act of story-telling, retelling the events in a way that shows where his loyalties lie. This act is the very inverse of Dylan's own internal monologue several pages earlier, in which he makes his grand confession to nobody but himself (although both accounts, inevitably, point to the very fallibility of the art of story-telling):

I let Edgar Reynolds be whipped because I had taken his homework; I stole from my mother's bag [...] I beat a dog with a stick so that it would roll over and lick my hand afterwards [...] I pulled my trousers down and showed Jack Williams; I saw Billy Jones beat a pigeon to death with a fire shovel, and laughed and got sick [...] <sup>397</sup>

The two stories share uncanny similarities: whereas Jack is threatened with being whipped, Dylan lets someone else be whipped on his behalf; where Dylan is accused of being a thief, he confesses himself to being one; where Gwilym's invitation to the barn 'in the dark' is suggestive of something sinister, here Dylan admits to exposing himself to Jack; where Jack

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<sup>395</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 142.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

tells his mother, Dylan keeps it to himself. More interesting though is what this mock confession says about the young Dylan. He can beat a dog into submission and force subservience, yet seeing another boy do something similar (if more extreme) to a pigeon brings on laughter and then, tellingly, sickness. This perhaps suggests that his behaviour with the dog is part of the natural order of things, that dogs have to be trained and an effective means of doing so is through violence, whilst killing a pigeon with a fire shovel is little more than gratuitous violence, hence his revulsion. However, Thomas strongly hints at notions of compliance: he beats the dog ‘so that it would roll over and lick my hand afterwards’. This goes beyond a need to train the dog and implies a premeditated desire to break it and to assert his own place above the dog. This is where the young Dylan betrays what are, given the theme of the story, very much class-based notions of master and servant. This is echoed in the section in which Jack and Dylan are playing and Jack, after being ‘shot’ by Dylan as they play Cowboys and Indians, refuses to fall down despite Dylan doing exactly that moments before:

Jack cried: “I see you! I see you!” He scampered after me. “Bang! bang! you’re dead!”

But I was young and loud and alive, though I lay down obediently.<sup>398</sup>

‘Jack is the son of a wealthier family than Dylan’s and so dictates the rules with which Dylan complies,’ notes Davies.<sup>399</sup> Dylan learns this behaviour and apes it with the dog, forcing it to ‘roll over’ just as he had been made to ‘lay down obediently’ by Jack. In both cases, subservience is gained through violence, literally with the dog and figuratively within the game. Arguably, both responses rely on a pre-existing hierarchical understanding: the dog lies down because it is beaten, because its species has been trained to lie down when beaten; Dylan lies down because his own species has been trained the same way. One might imagine the eponymous young dog coming dangerously close to licking his master’s hand, although having

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<sup>398</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 138.

<sup>399</sup> James A. Davies, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 175.

already confessed to exposing himself to Jack earlier in the story, this might not have been needed. That in itself is an unusual confession to make, suggesting a level of trust, of reciprocity, that borders on the sexual. However, it should be more properly read in the context of class hegemony: Dylan shows Jack his, but Jack, to the best of our knowledge, demurs. In this simple act Thomas reveals the imbalance of their relationship, one in which Dylan seemingly feels compelled to sacrifice his own dignity in order to appease, shock or in some other way elicit a reaction from somebody else, somebody who, we discover, has a background far more privileged than his own and who has the power to command the ‘young and loud and alive’ Dylan to ‘lie down obediently’ at his command.

Another of Thomas’s confessions is that ‘I let Edgar Reynolds be whipped because I had taken his homework’. This single statement contains two crimes: taking the homework and allowing an innocent boy to be punished for something that Dylan himself did (or rather did not do). The second of these wrongdoings is the more emotive, however it is the first offense that is the more damning here, as it shows Dylan capable of exploiting another individual’s labour for personal gain. The power dynamic is again (more subtly this time) alluded to: Dylan *takes* the homework, as opposed to stealing it, copying it, or otherwise fraudulently claiming Edgar Reynolds’ homework for his own. It is a matter of strength expressed dispassionately, with Thomas evoking something akin to the imposition of a superior will, whereby he ‘lets’ the whipping happen because he had ‘taken’ the boy’s work. This again feeds into the idea of the young Dylan as having an understanding of modes of power and compliance just as he does with the beaten dog.

Dylan, as we’ve seen, can be both controlling and controlled, both dominating and subservient. This dualism manifests itself in various ways throughout ‘The Peaches’. For example, when Dylan is described as being in his ‘serge suit with a darned bottom’ and is

awaiting ‘the richest woman in Wales’ (Mrs. Williams), he enthusiastically expresses his desire to

[...] wear my old suit, to look like a proper farm boy and have manure in my shoes and hear it squelch as I walked, to see a cow have calves and a bull on top of a cow [...] to go out and shout, ‘Come on, you b—,’ and pelt the hens and talk in a proper voice.<sup>400</sup>

Here Thomas subverts the idea of ‘a proper voice’, rejecting the idea of ‘proper’ as suggesting well-spoken in favour of a meaning that implies something raw, obscene, closer to nature and unaffected by social sensibilities. Indeed, the repetition of the word ‘proper’ links the ‘proper voice’ that he wishes to speak with to the ‘proper farm boy’ that Dylan wishes to look like, to be a farm boy that (he imagines) has manure on his shoes, watches cows mate, shouts and swears. His proper voice would be one that echoes the image of Dylan as ‘young and loud and alive’, empowered and closer to the natural rhythms of the earth. The suggestion is that ‘proper’ should be read as meaning authentic, and that, by implication, the world of serge suits and the richest woman in Wales is inauthentic. The ‘proper’ world contains waste and it reproduces, and it is present on the family farm. The fact that Dylan longs for this authentic existence whilst dressed in the uniform of his suburban life hints at the internal tensions that ultimately manifest themselves in the confessions, confessions which also dwell on bodily functions and sensations: whipping, drinking urine, beating, licking, bleeding, exposing the genitals, killing and sickness. The location of the crimes to which Dylan confesses is the bourgeois world of his home life (his own authentic life), but they allude to the rural world of his close relatives in the countryside. The class conflict of ‘The Peaches’ (and the antagonistic relationship between the suburban and the rural) is, in this interplay between ‘proper’ and inauthentic lives, discernible in the young Dylan as a psychologically charged status anxiety: Dylan’s much desired attempts to embody the natural world in the city are, ultimately, recalled without pride

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<sup>400</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 135.

but guilt. That there is this sexual, bodily emphasis makes it difficult for one not to detect the influence of Freud on Thomas's writing here.<sup>401</sup>

To continue the psychoanalytical theme, the character Dylan's neurosis is unlike that of Annie, a woman who is very much possessed of a more singular sense of her place in the world even if this sense of place is, in effect, a source of anxiety. Dylan's shifting allegiance and ability to adjust to changing power dynamics afford him a freedom that none of the other characters in 'The Peaches' seem to possess. With the exception of Dylan, they are all far from comfortable when confronted with *how the other half live* (this phrase is especially apposite for Dylan who seems to embody both halves). Uncle Jim is perplexed to the point of open aggression when he comes into contact with this other half and is, like his son Gwilym, completely absent from the closing scenes; Mrs. Williams is visibly appalled to be on a farm and bemused by the offer of tinned peaches; and Jack Williams, openly affirming his hostility and his allegiance with his accusations, retreats into a perceived sense of superiority. All of these characters live in self-imposed isolation from the 'other', consequently inhabiting far smaller, far less varied worlds than Dylan. The boundaries between these separate spaces are established by class-consciousness and class antagonism, but Dylan, who is able to adapt to either side, is free to inhabit both. Indeed, even his confessions could be read as an unashamed recounting of his exploits on either side of this divide and, furthermore, as a boastful articulation of the empowerment that this freedom affords him.

'The Peaches' is a story that dwells on the politest consequences of class struggle, whereby failed attempts to mediate between parties on opposing sides of the class divide point

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<sup>401</sup> Thomas's own description of Freud's influence on his work (specifically his poetry) is itself rather earthy. In answer to the question 'Have you been influenced by Freud and how do you regard him?', he stated, 'Yes. Whatever is hidden should be made naked. To be stripped of darkness is to be clean, to strip of darkness is to make clean. Poetry, recording the stripping of the individual darkness, must inevitably, cast light upon what has been hidden for too long, and, by so doing, make clean the naked exposure. [...] Benefitting by the sight of the light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness, poetry must drag further into the clean nakedness of light even more of the hidden causes than Freud could realise'. (Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writing*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. 150).

to an altogether grander social schism. This mediation relies on understanding and tolerance, confidence and belief, but ultimately results in discord when too few of the characters (arguably only Annie) attempt to find some common ground. The lack of reconciliation at the end of the story suggests Thomas held little hope that there would ever be a lasting truce between the two sides, and this pessimism is reflected in the misunderstanding, and subsequent anxiety, around the tin of peaches. The consequence of Mrs. Williams's dismissive attitude, coupled with Uncle Jim's outburst, marks the trajectory of all characters, momentarily brought together but clearly, by the end, retreating back into their separate domains, their much smaller worlds. Social complexity is lost in favour of pre-existing commonality, horizons shrink, friendship is suspended. Meyer notes of 'The Peaches':

As in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and indeed in numerous other *Künstlerroman*, Thomas depicts the artist as a divided being with conflicting ideals of detachment, pulled between life as an ordinary man in the world and his consecration as an artist [...] The artist is usually left alone at the end of each story. Exile becomes inevitable, although undesirable – and a way out is offered through a sense of community acquired through art, through a shared story-telling.<sup>402</sup>

Although true of many of the stories within *Portrait*, it is my belief that the reverse is happening in 'The Peaches', that Thomas's story-telling reinforces the idea of a divided community, that exile might, indeed, be preferable to the sort of community that is formed when disparate parts of society are forced, for whatever reason and for however long, to co-exist. His final isolation, waving his handkerchief to a friend that ignores him, is bold and joyful, as if the inevitable exile is not 'undesirable' but fully understood, there being no need for 'a way out'. Indeed, the story-telling that occurs within 'The Peaches' oftentimes achieves the opposite purpose to that of fostering 'a sense of community'. Rather, the confession of Thomas is secretive, the confession of Jack is divisive, the sermon of Gwilym is terrifying, and

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<sup>402</sup> Ann E. Mayer, *Artists in Dylan Thomas' Prose Works: Adam Naming and Aesop Fabling* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 93.

even the game of ‘Cowboys and Indians’ – with its shared narrative – ends with misunderstanding and accusation. Thomas intended this story to act as social commentary, to expose the snobbery of his suburban life and the debilitating effect such conceitedness has on those unfortunate enough to be the target of it. Rather than finding himself alone at the end, Dylan has reinforced his sense of place within his family, the autobiographical feature of *Portrait* prompting one to consider how these moments fed into his development as an artist and led to the creation of the very story that depicts his progression towards becoming a socially aware, socially critical author. ‘The Peaches’ is, therefore, both a critique and a condemnation of the middle class, and a meditation on the divided nature of a child who was born the product of social aspiration.

### 3.2 Patronizing the Lower Classes

‘Where Tawe Flows’ is a story described by Ackerman as a satire on ‘the excesses of Welsh Nationalism’.<sup>403</sup> It is certainly that, but it also contains the most obvious examples of Mayer’s notion of ‘a sense of community acquired through art, through a shared story-telling’. However, and crucially, Thomas elicits the satire of the piece from an altogether different, even misleading, ‘sense’ of a community acquired in this way. Indeed, a nod to the absurd is suggested in the opening dialogue:

[...] ‘We’re Ogpu men, let us in!’  
‘We’re looking for seditious literature,’ said Mr Humphries with difficulty, raising his hand in salute.  
‘Heil, Saunders Lewis! and we know where to find it,’ said Mr Roberts.<sup>404</sup>

Allusions to the ‘excesses of Welsh Nationalism’ stand in stark relief to the content of the work being written by the characters, which, as we discover, is far from anti-authoritarian and

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<sup>403</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Works* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 107.

<sup>404</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 186. Nb. ‘Ogpu’ refers to the O.G.P.U., the secret police in Soviet era Russia and precursor to the K.G.B.

anything but anti-establishment. Indeed, the events of 'Tawe', centring as they do on four friends who are collaborating on a book entitled, rather tellingly, 'a Novel of Provincial Life,'<sup>405</sup> depict the archetypal, class-based, British drawing room *mise en scène*, something of which Thomas is at pains for us to be aware. The book should, one would expect after this opening dialogue, be informed by, even driven by, social awareness, it should be disruptive to the mechanisms of rule (or at least try to be) and marked by Socialist theory and have a noticeable political frame. It should be subversive, 'seditious'. Indeed, the friends themselves are, we discover, a Socialist, a Nationalist, a civil servant and a would-be Bohemian. Given the politico-artistic milieu of the time, one would be forgiven for anticipating 'seditious literature', and it is this anticipation as much as anything else that Thomas seeks, through 'Tawe', to lampoon.

The opening exchanges serve to further reinforce the idea of a politicised group, ranging from the Mosleyites ('Thugs' according to Mr. Humphries) to the notion of free will ('Seriously, what are we to do about this uniformication of the individual?' they ask).<sup>406</sup> This seriousness is also evident in their approach to writing, which involves retrieving the – as yet – incomplete transcript from a hiding place in the grandfather clock and removing the blue bow wrapped around it. The ritual is completed by ensuring that somebody is available to minute the proceedings. The cultish affectations of the group do, however, reveal another instance of Thomas being out of step with, or, indeed, in private opposition to, the prevailing, established social order, just as he had been when interpreting the notion of a 'proper' voice in 'The Peaches'. When questioned as to whether or not Thomas had 'put anything on paper' for the group to read, his reply is 'Not yet, Evans', but a silent confession in the text, similar to the confession in 'The Peaches', reveals that:

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<sup>405</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 191.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid*, p. 189.



He had been writing, that week, the story of a cat who jumped over a woman the moment she died and turned her into a vampire. He had reached the part of the story where the woman was an undead children's governess, but he could not think how to fit it into the novel.<sup>407</sup>

This is not, as Thomas knows, what the group were anticipating, although readers of Thomas's earlier works might very well expect the real Thomas, at this point in his development, to be writing this sort of story, alluding as it does to his earlier, more phantasmagorical works (perhaps even gently parodying them). Thomas's awareness prompts him to ask, somewhat hesitantly, whether the group is obliged 'to avoid the fantastic altogether', and indeed, as suspected, they are. Mr. Humphries suggests that the group 'get [their] realism straight,' continuing that 'Mr Thomas will be making all the characters Blue Birds before we know where we are'<sup>408</sup> if they do not.

As it was in 'The Peaches', so too here the idea of a 'proper' voice is contrasted, contradicted, positioned against the established notion of what constitutes appropriate in a given context, but this time it is Thomas's authorial voice, arguably a more personal voice to the one he uses to address his family and friends, that is decidedly inappropriate, and perhaps this explains his coyness in the face of obvious criticism. He makes no defence of his desire not 'to avoid the fantastic altogether', despite his entire contribution to the overall work up to this point being 'fantastic'. In this scenario, however, older than we saw him in 'The Peaches' and surrounded by a chosen peer group, his own social anxiety, as well as insecurity about his writing, is revealed through the excusatory tone of his question and through his unwillingness to cite the merits of his style, as if, like his aunt in 'The Peaches', he feels out of place and unsure of himself.

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<sup>407</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 192.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

‘Tawe’ focuses in particular on one of the many stories which will make it into the finished book, Mr. Evans’s story about Mary (though as Mr. Evans points out ‘that’s not her name really. I’m calling her that because she is a real woman and we don’t want any libel’).<sup>409</sup> Mr. Evans, in an atmosphere of position and counter-position, grounds his story in a context diametrically opposed to the stance taken by Mr. Humphries, who asserts that the ‘life of that mythical common denominator, the man in the street, is dull as ditchwater [...] Capitalist society has made him a mere bundle of repressions and useless habits under that symbol of middle-class divinity, the bowler’.<sup>410</sup> Mr. Evans, on the other hand, believes that ‘the everyday man’s just as interesting a character as the neurotic poets of Bloomsbury’,<sup>411</sup> a statement which seeks to place the importance, moreover relevance, of his ‘life’ (Mary’s, as well as his own) on a par with those of the Bloomsbury Set. His tone is defensive like Thomas’s, warning against ‘more interruptions from the intelligentsia’ and asking the listeners to ‘forget the class war, I could see it smouldering’, suggesting that a tension already exists which, he worries, the theme of his story will further inflame. Unlike the fictionalised Thomas, though, he is willing to confront it.

The story concerns a girl who has lost her mother and lives with a father who ‘drank like a fish, but he was always a gentleman with it’.<sup>412</sup> Mr. Evans’s description of the father, the setting (a Carmarthen farmhouse) and his depiction of Mary, who had ‘specially cleaned and polished’ the house to entertain her prospective husband, Marcus, so as to ‘prove [...] that her background was prosperous enough for her to be his bride’<sup>413</sup> seem to recall in character and location numerous aspects of ‘The Peaches’. As informed readers, we are therefore able to see

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<sup>409</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 193.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid*, p. 192. For a more exhaustive explanation of the symbolic importance of ‘the bowler’, see M. Rowe, “Living ‘under the shadow of the bowler’” in *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Vision Press, 1990).

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid*, p. 193.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid*, p. 192.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid*, p. 195.

this telling of a story about a ‘real woman’ as a retelling of Thomas’s own earlier story, this time seen through the eyes of the bourgeois and self-confessed ‘suburbanite’ narrator,<sup>414</sup> Mr. Evans. Our own knowledge of this as a retelling brings into a degree of relief Thomas’s reactions throughout the story, so that when, midway through Mr. Evans’s account, the story is interrupted by Mr. Roberts, Thomas’s character snaps ‘I will have hush’, to which Mr. Roberts replies, ‘Ave ‘ush, is the phrase [...] you’re afraid we’ll think you’re patronizing the lower classes if you drop your aspirates’.<sup>415</sup> This response is revealing and accurate, since this is exactly what the character Thomas does fear, though not for dropping his aitches. Of all the characters, it is Thomas who is the least comfortable with the story of Mary, seeing within her tale echoes of his own family history. His comment on the would-be groom’s decision to run from the house leads to another informative exchange:

‘I think Marcus is a fellow to be despised [...] I’d never leave a girl like that, would you, Mr Humphries?’

‘Under a table too. That’s the bit I like. That’s a position. Perspectives were different [...] That narrow Puritanism is a spent force [...] What happened afterwards? Did the girl die of cramp?’<sup>416</sup>

Mr. Humphries, in his role as rhetorician, offers an insensitive and flippant reply to Thomas’s decidedly humane indignation. However, as Mr. Evans continues (in support of this somewhat facetious tone), ‘Its social implications are outside our concern’.<sup>417</sup> This last remark alters our perception of the story (and, furthermore, the majority of the storytellers) from what begins as a representation of the various ‘cross-section[s]’ of Swansea to being a product of only one of these strata, and thereby representative, in the Marxist historicist sense, of that strata alone. Just as Jack Williams retold the tale of his time amongst the rural folk of Gorsehill to his mother,

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<sup>414</sup> ‘Mary [...] wasn’t a suburbanite from birth [...] like you and me. Or like me, anyway.’ (Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 193).

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*

here too we see a retelling of events from a privileged viewpoint, one which likewise suggests a failure of the bourgeois protagonist to engage with a proletarian setting.

At the very beginning of 'Tawe', Thomas offers us an alternative title to the proposed book, when Mr. Roberts, surveying the comfortable setting of Mr. Evans's study, thinks, 'At home with the *bourgeoisie*'<sup>418</sup> and it is perhaps this epithet that more accurately reflects the scope of the project, in contrast to the somewhat hollow parting salute with which the story closes: 'Good night, comrades'.<sup>419</sup> Indeed, the way in which Thomas concludes 'Tawe' seems to suggest that the 'Novel of Provincial Life' is specifically concerned with Mr. Evans's provincial life, a life with which he is left as the 'three friends' (Thomas, Mr. Humphries and Mr. Roberts) walk away together, away from Mr. Evans's salubrious home and the 'shadow of the bowler'.

'Where Tawe Flows' may be seen as an 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room' turned inside out: the socio-political discussions of a group of men prove merely a cover for clandestine story-telling as a common and at times pressing human act, into which the participants naturally lapse [...] <sup>420</sup>

Mayer's reading, though understandably vague, perhaps misses the central contradiction of 'Tawe'. As we've seen, Thomas presents us with a group of friends for whom the inconsistencies of a town are the spur to creative action. Underpinning their sense of urgency is a sense of kinship and a fleeting identification with the Russian Communists (Mr. Evans describes his story about Mary as 'almost Russian').<sup>421</sup> However, and perhaps as a result of a 'natural lapse' into storytelling, their outlook becomes narrower (Mr. Roberts's story of the

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<sup>418</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 187.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>420</sup> Ann E. Mayer, *Artists in Dylan Thomas' Prose Works: Adam Naming and Aesop Fabling* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), pp. 122 – 123. Thomas alluded to the influence of *Dubliners* on his own *Portrait* in a letter to a student, reprinted in Scully, J. (ed.) *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*. Glasgow: William Collins & Sons & Co, 1977, pp. 198 - 199. Here Thomas refers to the obvious similarity between the title of his own *Portrait* and that of Joyce and how this may have led some readers to infer an influence where none existed. Thomas is pointed in refuting the claim that Joyce was one of the 'dominant influences' on his work. He does, however, comment that *Dubliners* 'was a pioneering work in the world of the short story, and no good storywriter since can have failed, in some way, however little, to have benefited by it'.

<sup>421</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 193.

slums, for example, ‘could not be included in the book’) and the group become passive, entrenched in the comfort of their surroundings despite the occasional digression into Marxist polemic. Though a ‘way out’ of exile ‘through a sense of community acquired through art’ is achieved, Thomas subtly suggests that the refuge is at best fleeting and fragile. At worst, it necessitates a denial of one’s self and one’s history, as exhibited by Thomas. The socio-political dimensions of their task give way to class stereotyping, such that, once again, the originally expansive world about which the authors will write is restricted, folded back into a secure, introspective song solely of themselves, without standing as exempla for any larger social portrait.

Unlike Mr. Roberts, Thomas had no trouble including his own account of the slums. Indeed, the final two stories of *Portrait* are set predominantly in the slums of Swansea and in surroundings considerably less respectable than Mr. Evans’s study. Both ‘Old Garbo’ and ‘One Warm Saturday’ reveal a side of Swansea beset by poverty and marked by the abuse of women, abuse which more often than not is enacted in an atmosphere of neglectful complicity, which the fictionalised Thomas, so used to romanticising and poeticising women, finds difficult to accommodate in his developing world view. His development, however, from the inquisitive protagonist we encounter at the beginning of the collection into the sensitive narrator of these final, closing snapshots of Swansea life, can be seen to hinge on such difficulties.

‘Old Garbo’ is one of the most poignant stories in *Portrait*, recounting the distressing final hours of the title character, Mrs. Prothero (‘We call her Old Garbo because she isn’t like [Greta Garbo], see’).<sup>422</sup> After being told that her daughter has died in childbirth, Mrs. Prothero spends the majority of the collection money raised for her by her friends on drink, before discovering that her daughter had not in fact died, though her grandchild had:

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<sup>422</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 219.

“[...] She’d spent a lot of it before they found her daughter wasn’t dead. She couldn’t face them then [...] So she finished it up by stop-tap Monday. Then a couple of men from the banana boats saw her walking across the bridge, and she stopped half way. But they weren’t in time.”<sup>423</sup>

The young Thomas is again a reporter, out on the town with the more experienced and decidedly less romantic Mr. Farr, who, we learn, Thomas treats as something of a role model. Implicit throughout the story is the notion that the mature Mr. Farr is perceived by the young Thomas as a Virgil-esque man of the world, leading him through the haze of Swansea’s underground and introducing him to the macabre characters that inhabit it.

Carrying on from ‘Tawe’ in terms of the variety of characters and voices, ‘Old Garbo’ again places the Thomas character at the centre of a social conflux, though the conflict between classes and ideologies in this case is very much due to the disparity between the world Thomas is introduced to and Thomas himself, who adapts uneasily to the social mores of a new group:

‘Old Solomon,’ said Mr Farr, ‘he’d cut every baby in half just for pleasure.’ I smiled and said: ‘I bet he would!’ But I wished that I could have answered in such a way as to show for Mr Solomon the disrespect I did not feel.<sup>424</sup>

Unlike in ‘Tawe’, opposition this time manifests itself purely as an internal discord, a desire to conform which is left unfulfilled and unspoken, and we see Thomas playing not only with ideas of expectation, as above, but also with the pressures of desire and reality, as evidenced by the frequent internal monologues which dwell on these mostly opposing conditions. Indeed, where ‘Tawe’ is delivered in the third person, ‘Old Garbo’ is written in the first, allowing far greater access to the anxieties of the character-Thomas under these conditions, where idealism (in this case, an immature poetic/romantic idealism) and realism appear mutually exclusive. Whereas before we could only see the result of dissonance (such as Thomas’s interjection into Mr.

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<sup>423</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 223.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

Evans's story), here Thomas provides a clearer description of the anxieties his character feels in an environment he is not accustomed to:

I leant against the bar, between an alderman and a solicitor, drinking bitter, wishing that my father could see me now and glad, at the same time, that he was visiting Uncle A. in Aberavon. He could not fail to see that I was a boy no longer [...] <sup>425</sup>

The mix of pride and shame which he feels, centred as it is on somewhat boyish concerns for his father's opinion of him, typifies these anxieties. At this point in the story he is only playing a role, making believe, the very thought that he is manifestly 'a boy no longer' proof that the very opposite is true. This is important, since it suggests a degree of innocence about the character which the author Thomas is able to dramatically contrast with the more unpleasant aspects of the slums his character is about to be introduced to, both in this story and in 'One Warm Saturday', thereby setting his character's comfortable existence and the harder, less privileged lives of the other characters in even greater relief. The vivid contrast, for example, between Thomas's character at the very end of the story – first staying in bed until midday on Sunday, then spending the rest of his time in the park writing, before returning on Tuesday to the pub 'with a borrowed half-crown' – and that of Mrs. Prothero - who, we discover, has spent all of Sunday and Monday drinking the remainder of the collection money, before finally committing suicide – is clear enough. Their lives could, indeed, not be any more different. Unlike Thomas's earlier stories, which bristle with a gleeful disrespect for authority, we are left here with no punchline and no hint of nostalgia.

However, there is the suggestion of importance. Concluding a series of meta-fictional asides which appear throughout 'Old Garbo', Thomas reveals that he 'showed this story a long time later to Mr Farr', <sup>426</sup> and although Mr. Farr contends some of the minor details, through

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<sup>425</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 216.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid*, p. 223.

the act of recording the death of Mrs. Prothero, of showing it to Mr. Farr and, in a sense, ‘showing’ it to us, Thomas has ensured that the tragedy of her life, the intrinsic detail of her suffering, is reported, read and known. By drawing our attention to this fact, Thomas clearly points to the importance of Mrs. Prothero’s life. Furthermore, the very last line of the story, ‘I’ll put them all in a story by and by’, reveals a conviction by Thomas to write the very collection in which this story appears, completing the meta-fictional mirror-image Thomas foregrounds throughout. So as to establish the idea that this moment of authorial revelation is applicable to a number of other stories aside from ‘Old Garbo’, the exchange between Thomas and Mr. Farr is preceded by Jack Stiff’s comment that, ‘We got a pair of gym-shoes on our slab’,<sup>427</sup> referring to Mrs. Prothero’s shoes whilst simultaneously recalling the image of Aunt Annie from ‘The Peaches’.

Thomas establishes an effective moral slant to his writing, a slant which I would contend is centred on predominantly Socialist ethics. Just as Mr. Evans stated that ‘the everyday man’s just as interesting a character as the neurotic poets of Bloomsbury’, Thomas’s character (and, by minimal extension, Thomas as author) asserts the same. By setting these events so close to Christmas (the final scene occurs on Christmas Eve), the impression left by ‘Old Garbo’ is of a sub-society, an underground, which will not share in the usual festivities. The only comment made to Jack Stiff’s account of Mrs. Prothero’s suicide is an anonymous voice repeating ‘Merry Christmas!’, the phrase enclosing the short section beginning, ‘What happened to Mrs. Prothero?’ and concluding, ‘But they weren’t in time’, quoted more fully above. The juxtaposition of Mrs. Prothero’s stillborn grandchild and a festival in celebration of the birth of Christ makes this ever more saddening, but it should also make us all the more sensitive to the terrible conditions that people find themselves in, conditions which Thomas highlights here.

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<sup>427</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 223.



Perhaps the most unpleasant aspect of 'Old Garbo', and one which contrasts with this moral edge, is Mr. Farr's attitude. Aside from the anti-Semitism he displays at the beginning of the story, his motivation for taking Thomas along to so many different pubs in one night is in order to find prostitutes, or 'shilling women' as he calls them. Even here, though, Thomas suggests an incongruity between desire and reality when, as Thomas waits for Mr. Farr in 'The Three Lamps' (a name suggestive of the Three Wise Men and a further distortion of The Nativity), he writes:

Mr Farr hurried down High Street, savagely refusing laces and matches, averting his eyes from the shabby crowds. He knew that the poor and the sick and the ugly, unwanted people were so close around him that, with one look of recognition, one gesture of sympathy, he would be lost among them and the evening would be spoiled for ever.<sup>428</sup>

In choosing to ignore or even deny the existence of poverty for fear that it may spoil his evening, Mr. Farr is shown to be the very antithesis of the developing Thomas character. It also reveals an unpleasant yet fundamental contradiction in his logic: for his evening to be a success, Mr. Farr is reliant upon one aspect of the 'shabby crowds' (namely prostitutes) that he would otherwise seek to ignore. Without one, there cannot be the other. In this sense, whereas Thomas takes note of his surroundings and uses the experience to create a useful, explicatory narrative, 'Farr must [...] harden himself against a recognition of the real needs of the poor that might drive a woman to sell herself for a shilling'.<sup>429</sup> Mr. Farr is, however, unable to escape the realities of poverty, and it is his pursuit of this kind of abridged poverty (one which would allow for sexual exploitation of the poor without confrontation with suffering) which effectively drives him from the Fishguard public house and the presence of Mrs. Prothero. Just as we saw Knox struggle with what Althusser termed the 'myth' of the bourgeoisie in *The Doctor and The Devils*, so too does Farr.

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<sup>428</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 217.

<sup>429</sup> Victor Paananen, 'The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 46-66) p. 49).

Thomas and Farr differ greatly. Thomas is a keen observer who turns his experience into literature for the betterment of those he sees suffering, whilst Mr. Farr appears to be a blinkered exploiter of the poor, unable to look at them, afraid he will be 'lost among them' and unable to express sympathy of any kind. However, Thomas states at the very beginning of the story that it 'was good to keep in with him; he covered all the big stories, the occasional murder, such as when Thomas O'Connor used a bottle on his wife [...] the strikes, the best fires',<sup>430</sup> which suggests that, of all the reporters at the '*Tawe News*', it is Mr. Farr who should emerge as the most insightful. His closing promise though, to introduce Thomas to a girl 'who'll show you where the sailor bit her' and 'a policeman who knew Jack Johnson',<sup>431</sup> sounds more like schoolboy bravado than mature understanding of the social conditions to which he, as a senior reporter, is exposed every day.

The final story of the collection, 'One Warm Saturday', functions in much the same way as 'Old Garbo', again focusing on the slums and the poverty of Swansea but at a more personal level, as we read of Thomas's attraction to a young prostitute called Lou. Appearing where it does, immediately after 'Old Garbo' and the fictionalised commitment to the people of the slums, Thomas again establishes a meta-fictional context for 'One Warm Saturday' whereby the degree to which the story is a literary construct is emphasised (people have literally been 'put in a story by and by')<sup>432</sup> whilst simultaneously enhancing the credibility and authenticity of these people.

One such person, as mentioned, is Lou. The story focuses on Thomas's chance meeting with Lou, of being invited back to her house along with another, older prostitute called Marjorie, as well as one of Lou's clients, Mr. O'Brien, and their unsteady descent into drunkenness. The story closes with an account of Thomas finding himself lost amongst the

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<sup>430</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 211 – 212.

<sup>431</sup> World Heavyweight Boxing Champion, 1908 – 1915.

<sup>432</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 223.

crumbling, rotten façade of the apartment block to which he is taken, out of reach of the girl to whom he feels so drawn. He describes the panic he feels at losing her, but concludes with emphasising the overwhelming sense of pity and compassion he experiences for the people that he has met. Drawing on ideas of imaginative licence established at the close of 'Old Garbo', Thomas depicts himself as a creative fantasist prone to reinterpretation. He is, to an extent, even reinterpreted himself, as throughout the story he is (for the only time in *Portrait*) called anything but 'Dylan' or 'Thomas', instead going by the name of 'Jack'. This break from a stricter autobiographical motif recalls Mr. Evans's comment in 'Tawe' about his own character, that 'I'm calling her [Mary] because she is a real woman and we don't want any libel'. This act of renaming, of diverting, conversely reinforces the authenticity of the tale and the fact that someone 'real' is being discussed. The name is also important in as far as it is given to him by Lou:

'We never drink with strangers,' Mrs Franklin said, laughing.  
'He isn't a stranger,' said Lou, 'are you Jack?'<sup>433</sup>

In taking the name assigned to him by Lou, a name drawn from a mix of colloquialism and forced professional familiarity, Thomas allows his own identity to be sublimated by the group, for his character to become a part of another narrative and another world, instead of asserting his own. Like any group-given moniker, this is a badge that Thomas wears with acceptance and pride, as evidenced by his willingness to be addressed by it.

The opening paragraph of the story sees Jack drawing in the sand, first 'a large, indented woman's figure' then 'a paunched man'. In both cases a naked child, running out the sea, inadvertently changes the pictures by jumping over them and dripping water on the figures. The woman gains 'two wide wet eyes and a hole in the footprinted middle' and the man 'a row of buttons [...] and a line of drops, like piddle in a child's drawing, between the long legs stuck

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<sup>433</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 234.

with shells'.<sup>434</sup> In both cases, the artist's (Jack's) intentions are frustrated: the overtly sexualised female figure becomes tearful and, with the footprint, literally penetrated, whilst the patriarchal male figure becomes infantilised and degraded. We see throughout the story similar attempts to construct a world creatively only for it to be displaced by reality and actuality, as in the case of Jack's interpretation of Lou herself, to which I will return. In both cases, though, the seriousness with which each fantasy figure is imbued is undercut by the very natural figure of the 'naked child, just out of the sea'<sup>435</sup> who runs amongst his creations. 'To find one's place in natural process', writes Paananen, '[...] is to achieve what Engels called the freedom that is the recognition of necessity',<sup>436</sup> and it is within this dialectical materialist framework that the juxtaposition of the natural child and the unnatural archetypes is played out. This is itself symbolic of the larger comparative exercise which takes place in 'One Warm Saturday', that of contrasting the families playing on the beach at the beginning of the story with the crumbling slum tenements at the end, of comparing community with isolation, integration with alienation, just as Mrs. Prothero's loss is compared to the celebration of Christmas. The natural process, embodied by the weekend crowds on Swansea beach, suggests a freedom from the kinds of economic pressures which, we come to realise, effect even the most fundamental aspects of a person's existence, to the extent that, for the very poor, their ability to socialise, to be a part of this wider social unit, is negated by circumstance. In this respect, the slums come to represent for Thomas a place of alienation from the natural process, from 'the freedom that is the recognition of necessity'.

Jack's drawings on the beach set the scene for a series of confrontations between the imaginative and the real, as in his relationship to Lou. Their first meeting comes at a point when Jack, having played cricket with a friendly and welcoming family, ponders his position:

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<sup>434</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 224.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>436</sup> Victor Paananen, 'The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas', *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 46-66 (p. 54).

He thought: Poets live and walk with their poems; a man with visions needs no other company; Saturday is a crude day; I must go home and sit in my bedroom by the boiler. But he was not a poet living and walking, he was a young man in a town on a warm bank holiday, with two pounds to spend [...]

He snarled at the flower clock in Victoria Gardens.<sup>437</sup>

This pendulous recasting of self-image, between the solitary poet and the sociable young man, between, effectively, the fantasist and the realist, reveals an instability within the character's notion of himself (specifically how he should behave) that is typical of adolescence. His divergent desires, towards experience on the one hand (literally embodied in his active external form) and fabrication on the other (the internalized world of the 'bedroom by the boiler') constantly act upon the character as he attempts to simultaneously engage with and verbalise the world around him, such that, like the two figures drawn in the sand, his creations become little more than distorted, unsatisfactory visions transformed by actuality.

This is the case with the character-Thomas's reading of Lou, who, upon overhearing Jack say to himself, 'And what shall a prig do now?'<sup>438</sup> smiles at his remark. What comes next are two descriptive paragraphs, each replete with minor contradictions. In the first Lou is described as having her hair 'arranged high on her head in an old-fashioned way, in loose coils and a bun', she wears a 'Woolworth's white rose' in her hair, as well as having a 'red paper flower pinned on her breast'. She has 'rings and bracelets that came from a fun-fair stall'. These slight, discordant features point, as with Jack's imagination, to both the realistic and the idealistic:

The portrayal of Lou is not intended as a delineation of a real woman in this story. She is half-goddess and half full-blooded sensual woman not because that is how she is but because that is how Jack sees her [...]. Of course, the irony lies in the way the truth about Lou dawns on the reader but not on Jack.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 226.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>439</sup> Linden Peach, *The Prose Writing of Dylan Thomas* (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1988), pp 99 – 100.

Thomas continues this descriptive duality into the next paragraph, with Jack perceiving in Lou an ‘innocent knowledge’ and imagines ‘her body bare and spotless and willing and warm under the cotton, and she waited without guilt’. The virginal overtones of his rhetoric are obvious, but so as to emphasise the interpretive, verbalising compulsion of Jack’s mind, Thomas concludes, ‘How beautiful she is, he thought, with his mind on words and his eyes on her hair and red and white skin’.<sup>440</sup> The ‘words’ overpower the image, such that when Lou’s supposed innocence is eventually contradicted by her abundant lack of coyness, Jack physically retreats from the encounter. However, the irony of the situation, which Peach points to above, is not lost on Jack. Indeed, as mentioned previously, it is the interplay between the real and the imagined, the slow erosion of the fantasy world by the actual, which contributes to the development of the character. The succeeding passage, in which Jack questions his reflection in the ‘Victoria saloon’, reveals this division and development:

She could drive my guilt out; she could smooth away my shame; why didn’t I stop to talk to her? he asked.

You saw a queer tart in a park, his reflection answered, she was a child of nature, oh my! oh my! Did you see the dewdrops in her hair? Stop talking to the mirror like a man in a magazine, I know you too well.<sup>441</sup>

The conflation of the romantic and the cynic in this short exchange points to a desire to engage with the real, as expressed in ‘Old Garbo’, but a desire tinged by preconceived notions of beauty and poetics. The fact that Jack’s desire is for Lou to in some way exorcise his ‘guilt’ or otherwise purify him are further part of the inward-looking, self-infatuated ‘poetic’ stance that his cynical side rebukes, so that the response from this more critical aspect of himself, both dismissive and obscene, is as far removed from the romanticised, abstracted version of the girl (and reality) as is possible. Unlike Mr. Farr, he is not able to simply ignore the effects of poverty, and any attempt to do so is inwardly deconstructed. Indeed, the phrase ‘like a man in

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<sup>440</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 227.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

a magazine', suggestive of fatuous advertising, coupled with 'I know you too well', indicate that Jack is attempting to follow a course away from introspection, away from the notion that 'a man with visions needs no other company',<sup>442</sup> in pursuit of a greater understanding of himself and the society around him.

It is shortly after this chastisement of himself that we learn of a fresh resolution by Jack, one which recalls the scene on the beach but is inclusive (in a way, incidentally, that the beach never was) of the slums:

He had no need of the dark interior world when Tawe pressed in upon him and the eccentric ordinary people came bursting and crawling, with noise and colours, out of their houses, out of the graceless buildings, the factories and avenues, the shining shops and blaspheming chapels, the terminuses and the meeting-halls, the falling alleys and brick lanes, from the arches and shelters and holes behind the hoardings, out of the common, wild intelligence of the town.<sup>443</sup>

This description, taking in many of the components of modern society, is contradictory in a similar way to his description of Lou: the 'eccentric ordinary' people, who are at the same time effusive ('bursting') and lame ('crawling'), appear with 'noise and colour' from factories, dilapidated housing, shelters, 'holes behind hoardings', all places which Jack will shortly be exposed to. These physical structures, so indicative of the slums, develop into the more ethereal (yet no less grand) 'common, wild intelligence of the town', suggesting that, like his earlier rejection of an internal fantasy construct, experience of these places is in itself a vehicle for better understanding. This polysyndetic section is echoed at the very close of the story (which is also the end of the collection as a whole) where the link to an underprivileged social group which Jack establishes here (as does the character Thomas previously in 'Old Garbo') is used to poignant effect, drawing attention firmly to the plight of the poor:

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<sup>442</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 226.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

Then he walked out of the house on to the waste space and under the leaning cranes and ladders. The light of the one weak lamp in a rusty circle fell across the brick-heaps and the broken wood and the dust that had been houses once, where the small and hardly known and never-to-be-forgotten people of the dirty town had lived and loved and died and, always, lost.

What this shows is that, unlike Mr. Farr's journey around the slums of Swansea, Jack's is not to be at the expense of the poor. Rather, he venerates the experience of being amongst the slums, benefitting from the experience he is offered and using this knowledge, as noted in 'Old Garbo', to produce literature about it. His relationship with Lou is a part of this experience, and when he sees her again entering the 'Victoria saloon', his instinct is to run, only on this occasion he 'remembered his age and poems, and would not move'.<sup>444</sup> Jack's commitment to his writing is not of the kind portrayed earlier in his adolescent eulogising of Lou, instead, '[h]e refused to meditate on her calmness now and twist her beauty into words [...] he woke with a start and saw a lively body six steps from him, no calm heart dressed in a sentence, but a pretty girl'.<sup>445</sup>

Lou, like Jack, is torn between ideals of love and harsh realism. Yet for her, as Thomas shows, the struggle is not against the romanticised towards the real, but rather against the very real circumstances of her life towards the hope of an imagined romance. On hearing her client, Mr. O'Brien, joke about the idea of love between Jack and Lou, Thomas's prose belies the impossibility of the kind of 'young love' Mr. O'Brien alludes to:

In the long silence, Lou collected glasses from the cupboard as though she had not heard Mr O'Brien speak. She drew the curtains, shut out the moon, sat on the edge of her bed with her feet tucked under her, looked at her photograph as at a stranger, folded her hands as she folded them, on their first meeting, before the young man's worship in the Gardens.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 230.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.



Earlier in the story, when asked by Jack if they would be alone soon, she had replied, ‘You and me and Mr Moon’,<sup>447</sup> and when, shortly before Mr. O’Brien’s comment, Mrs. Franklin says, ‘I can see the wicked old moon’,<sup>448</sup> Lou’s response is to say that she loves it. The physical shutting out of the moon, therefore, represents a shutting out of love, desire and of hope. The literary-historic connotations of the moon are well known, and here Thomas uses them to signal the separation of Lou from these traditionally natural, feminine desires into a state of alienation from her natural self (i.e. ‘she [...] looked at her photograph as at a stranger’). This painful closing off of a very potent part of herself causes Lou to regress to a point before ‘the young man’s worship’, to a state of isolation whereby her instinct is to physically curl up (she tucks her feet under herself and folds her hands). Faced with the economic imperative of her work as a prostitute, Lou is unable to even look upon a symbol of her desires, instead forced to close in upon herself and capitulate to her working alter ego. The restrictions placed upon Lou by poverty go far beyond the material into the deeply personal, beautifully rendered in the distortion of a pre-lapsarian state (‘before the young man’s worship in the Gardens’).

David Holbrook summarises ‘One Warm Saturday’ in the following way:

So the reader is invited to feel [Jack’s] pain [...], to share his agonies of frustration, to see his situation, when he stumbles, drunk, about the sordid tenement seeking a dowdy tart at night and not finding her, as tragic. [...] This is really an infantile appeal for us to share the author-protagonist’s flight from adult reality.<sup>449</sup>

The merit of Holbrook’s criticism lies in showing how the scene which Thomas sets, particularly at the very end of the book, might ultimately fail. Indeed, one of Holbrook’s many criticisms of Thomas is that he is trying to shock the middle classes by resorting to immorality (Holbrook though does confess that his own ‘worst proclivities for moralizing’ do at times

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<sup>447</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 236.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>449</sup> David Holbrook, *Llareggub Revisited: Dylan Thomas and the State of Modern Poetry* (London: Bowes and Bowes 1962), p. 244.

emerge).<sup>450</sup> It is perhaps understandable that, by concluding the story in the way that he does, with descriptions of poverty (such as the sight of ‘two figures on a black heap on the floor’ in one room, a little girl being dragged by the hair by her mother, rotten stairs, empty squats, mad women, screaming babies),<sup>451</sup> Thomas is indeed in danger of offending the very sensibilities which Holbrook and many others would deem ‘moral’. I would, however, counter Holbrook’s point that the impression left at the end of ‘One Warm Saturday’ is one of frustration. Indeed, the remark that the ‘dust that had been houses once’ contained ‘never-to-be-forgotten people [...] who had lived and loved and died and, always, lost’ shows far more in the way of compassion than frustration, suggesting that his own impression of the world is not that it is ‘glorious’, nor that this episode has been a ‘flight from adult reality’ (Jack is in a constant struggle against such impulses, if anything). Certainly, the sentimental aspects of this somewhat elegiac conclusion belie a sense of pity which is not wholly objective, however to imply that Jack’s emotions on ending the night without Lou revolve around sexual dissatisfaction is, I think, a far from accurate assessment.

What Thomas achieves by having Jack lose his beloved Lou is to make Lou anonymous (even a ‘dowdy tart’, to use Holbrook’s phrase), literally lost amongst countless other people living similar lives and under similar conditions. Indeed, as Jack runs from room to room calling her name, asking people where he might find her, it transpires that nobody has heard of her, nor her guests. Lou’s story becomes symbolic, representative of the fate of hundreds, thousands, who suffer similar privations, and by giving a face and a name to an otherwise amorphous conglomerate of ‘the poor’ (as Mr. Farr perceives them), Thomas invites us to appreciate the human cost of poverty, which extends beyond the acquisitive to include the emotional. Without Jack’s engaged, empathic response to the slums, his sense of panic, of

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<sup>450</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 242.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 241-243.

displacement and loss, would threaten to render the story one of hopelessness. However, the pathos expressed at the very end draws us back to this as an expression of the conditions of the slums, as an account of poverty. As depressing as the scene may be, the very act of reading about such conditions makes them 'never-to-be-forgotten' and confers a degree of importance on them which far outweighs any lingering coital obsession.

As an exercise in meta-fiction, 'One Warm Saturday' succeeds in achieving the very aims Thomas foregrounds in the preceding story, by creating an outward looking, socially aware narrative founded on an expression of the lives of the people who inhabit the slums of Swansea. In choosing to end his 'portrait' in the way in which he does, Thomas confronts the very 'adult reality' Holbrook sees the author fleeing from. I would suggest that this difference in opinion is partly due to a matter of perspective. In seeing 'One Warm Saturday' as a story about Jack (as a fictionalised manifestation of the living Dylan Thomas), Holbrook's attention would be turned on the character solely, on his actions, thus limiting his approach.<sup>452</sup> If readers instead shift that perspective, seeing the world around the character as the character himself sees it, then his own actions, their very importance, become so diminished that we are forced to conclude that the story, the 'portrait', is not about Thomas at all, but rather about the society he encounters.

Some of the dialogic aspects of *Portrait* have already been addressed, specifically where Thomas uses characterisation as a vehicle for a discourse between the semi-fictionalised authorial presence of the developing character-Thomas and a substratum of society alienated from the majority by poverty. This discourse, in which the aspiring author uses his experience of marginalised places and people to create works about these very places and people, is in

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<sup>452</sup> '[Holbrook's] reading is weakened, however, by his tone, and the attitudes it betrays. Contrary to his explicit claim, Holbrook's tone is biased by an unchecked hostility which manifests itself in a reductive pathologizing approach to Thomas's work.' (Eynel Wardi, *Once Below a Time: Dylan Thomas, Julia Kristeva, and Other Speaking Subjects* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 174 – 175).

itself indicative of the socialist drive which underpins *Portrait*. Indeed, this palpable sense of reciprocity is suggested in the title of the collection, where the formalist allusions of ‘Portrait of the Artist’ are juxtaposed with, and undermined by, the ‘Young Dog’ moniker. The final title is literary and at the same time accessible, recalling Joyce without implying avantgardism. Furthermore, the semantic interplay works on two levels, by not just deflating the austere, grandiose suggestion of literary archetype that ‘Portrait of the Artist’ hints at (indicative itself of an intertextuality which could render the work elitist) but also by legitimising the informal ‘Dog’ motif and thereby tacitly benefitting from the gravitas that such intertextual authority engenders. The title seeks mediation between an audience familiar with the (legitimising) literary-historical trope invoked by Thomas and the vast majority of readers who would not in this instance have benefited from an education focused on literature. Thomas placed this mediation in a larger political context when he wrote, in his letter to the poet and novelist Glyn Jones quoted in the preceding chapter, of the importance of his approach to a Communist aesthetic and of the need to ‘bring the Workers *up* to what one is writing’.<sup>453</sup> Golightly rightly points to the significant influence Bert Trick had on Thomas, both in shaping his understanding of Marxism and in helping Thomas marry Modernist aesthetics with the distinctly Communist desire to avoid creating art which could be seen as elitist, reactionary or exploitative. As Golightly notes, though, ‘Thomas’s grafting of the Modernist privileging of suggestion over direct statement onto classical Marxism is ultimately problematic’, even if the idea of elevating workers to a point where such privileging is negated by educational commonality is not.<sup>454</sup>

As mentioned, the title of *Portrait* was to be ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog: stories towards a Provincial Autobiography’. The equivocation present in this last section is revealing, for it highlights one of the more apparent socialist aspects of *Portrait*, that of writing

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<sup>453</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 142.

<sup>454</sup> Victor Golightly, ‘“Writing in dreams and blood”: Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea’, *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 67-91 (p. 83).

for the community. I've shown how the *Künstlerroman* drive of the collection is inexorably linked to this community, how Thomas's artistic development is seen as a process of mediation and empathy, but I would go further and suggest that the development of Thomas's character is not what *drives* the collection at all. Rather, it is subordinate to the more pressing, more present existence of the community, that 'Provincial Autobiography' comes to stand for a collection written by and about the Province, the locality, in this case Swansea, in a way similar to texts such as *The Mabinogion*.<sup>455</sup> The author-protagonist, being only a part of this story (and certainly not the most important part), recurs as a familiar face, a familiar landmark, witnessed at varying times throughout the entire narrative (as are other characters, particularly in later stories), however the actual facts of his life, his development (moral, artistic or political) are marginalised by the more pressing stories of which he becomes the witness and author. He is forced to defer to the society he learns from, as its distinctiveness, its 'eccentric ordinary [...] common, wild intelligence' overwhelms his own, such that the would-be autobiographical subject becomes, at best, the deuteragonist supporting the many leads. The stories I have already examined follow this pattern: 'The Peaches' is ostensibly about Ann; 'Where Tawe Flows' focuses on the story of Mary as told by Mr. Evans; 'Old Garbo' is both eponymous and the story of Mr. Farr; and 'One Warm Saturday' is predominantly about Lou as a symbol of the poverty of the slums.

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<sup>455</sup> Of particular relevance are the many 'onomastic tales', which Jones describes as 'the fanciful explanation of the name of a place or person' (*The Mabinogion*, ed. by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: Everyman, 2002), p. xvi).

### 3.3 Who Do You Wish Was With us?

I should like to conclude by considering how this displacement of the Thomas character by other, apparently secondary characters is maintained throughout the remaining vignettes, with the effect that many conventional ideas of autobiography are superseded by a contradictory communal biographic imperative.

The second story in the collection, 'A Visit to Grandpa's', typifies this displacement. 'A Visit to Grandpa's' is the story of a very young Thomas witnessing first-hand the quasi-suicidal impulses of his grandfather and how a community rallies round to comfort his relative. In it Thomas functions more as a witness than a participant, more reactive than active, and, as is befitting of a child of his generation, more seen (and seeing) than heard. The story begins with Thomas waking to the sound of his grandfather riding imaginary horses in the bedroom next to his own, apparently in the grips of a vivid nightmare, and Thomas goes to check on him:

He stared at me mildly. Then he blew down his pipe, scattering the sparks and making a high, wet dog-whistle of the stem, and shouted: 'Ask no questions.'  
After a pause, he said slyly: 'Do you ever have nightmares, boy?'  
I said: 'No.'  
'Oh, yes, you do,' he said.<sup>456</sup>

As the scene develops, we learn that, far from being a somnambulistic act, Thomas's grandfather is very much awake and very much aware (or so it seems) of his actions, responding to his grandson's concerns, even giving him a sovereign by way of a bribe, only to return, once the boy has left, to his fantasy. The effect this has on Thomas is profound, as he reveals the next morning:

I woke from a dream of fiery horses on a plain that was littered with furniture, and of large, cloudy men who rode six horses at a time and whipped them with burning bed clothes.<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 144.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid*, p. 144.

If we take it as read that the young Thomas was telling the truth when he claimed never to have had nightmares, then we can see how deep the experience of seeing his grandfather behaving so strangely has gone. This is repeated later, after a trip with his grandfather to Llanstephan village:

I woke [...] out of dreams where the Llanstephan sea carried bright sailing-boats as long as liners; and heavenly choirs [...] in brass-buttoned waistcoats, sang in a strange Welsh to the departing sailors.<sup>458</sup>

The reference to ‘brass-buttoned waistcoats’ (recalling his grandfather’s clothes) suggests that the unconscious Thomas is becoming further obsessed with the more eccentric presence of his grandfather, who becomes the central motif. His own displacement, as it were, occurs to such an extent that Thomas himself fails to even appear in these dreams, except as an unacknowledged observer, caught up in exactly the kind of nightmare his grandfather insisted upon (‘Oh, yes, you do’). This use of the unconscious, of psychoanalytical markers such as dream imagery, foreshadows the psychological problems that his grandfather exhibits in the second half of the story, when we see him purposefully marching alone towards Llangadock in his brass-buttoned waistcoat ‘to be buried’. The somewhat ironic relationship Thomas establishes between his own character and his fictionalised grandfather is therefore one of projection as much as displacement: Thomas’s grandfather wishes to be buried, but unwittingly suppresses (or ‘buries’) his grandson’s unconscious self with forceful, frightening expressions of his desire. In terms of narrative, this translates into the character-Thomas becoming little more than an interpreter of his grandfather, a means of rendering his grandfather’s thoughts through his own thoughts, and his actions through a repetition of those actions, as Thomas’s pursuit of his grandfather towards the end of the story shows. In effect, he becomes the biographer of his grandfather.

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<sup>458</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 145.

The story concludes with the kind of celebration of community spirit that Thomas would repeat in *Under Milk Wood*, as we see the young narrator caught up in the panic that spreads when the village hears that ‘Dai Thomas has been to Llanstephan, and he’s got his waistcoat on’.<sup>459</sup> Like some kind of Communist fairy tale, we read of Mr. Griff the Barber, Dan Tailor (who is, unsurprisingly, the tailor), Morgan Carpenter and Mr. Price set off towards the outskirts of town in search of their neighbour, all the time keeping the young Thomas unaware of why they are going to such lengths to catch up with him. The way in which Thomas blends lexical semantics with a comical parochialism suggests a very close-knit community, one which instinctively knows when something is wrong with one of its members and immediately sets about helping them as a community. Of course, the humorous touches in this story mask the more troubling aspects of the narrative (namely, the grandfather’s apparent dementia), but the overall effect is more touching than stark, more sympathetic than serious, and so it achieves a sense of genuine warmth which a ‘straight’ or heavily symbolic piece might not have been as capable of conveying. Instead, Thomas describes a community which cares for those who live within it, which not only tolerates the eccentric and the vulnerable (as is the case with the grandfather) but positively welcomes and protects them. The image that Thomas leaves us with at the very end of ‘A Visit’ is likewise touched by this protectiveness, describing his grandfather not in terms of any madness (though he is clearly suffering), but rather with an emphasis on his nobility and strength: ‘But grandpa stood firmly on the bridge, and clutched his bag to his side, and stared at the flowing river and the sky, like a prophet who has no doubt’.<sup>460</sup> This emphasis on stability and certainty, though going against what we know of the grandfather, serves to reinforce an awareness of the spirit of acceptance and protection that the townsfolk display,

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<sup>459</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 146.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.



revealing the degree to which Thomas has become, in a very short space of time, integrated into the protective group mentality.

Likewise, 'Patricia, Edith, and Arnold' ends with Thomas showing signs of a protective kinship, lying so as to shield his nanny from the influence of a wayward lover. The story sees a very young Thomas being taken along by his nanny, Patricia, and the servant from next door, Edith, to Cwmdonkin Park to confront Arnold, who has been seeing both women. The young Thomas, playing in the snow, witnesses Arnold whispering to Edith behind Patricia's back after he has declared his love for the latter, suggesting that despite being forced to choose by the two women which of them he would rather be with, he is determined to maintain the status quo and continue to see them both. In the story, the young Thomas displays flashes of insight and concern which eventually result in Patricia's and Thomas's roles becoming essentially reversed, with Thomas assuming the responsibility of guardian and Patricia that of ward. By doing so, the character Thomas is again aping the behaviour of those around him, this time repeating the protective instincts displayed by Patricia herself, who had admonished Arnold for being cruel to Edith, not her.<sup>461</sup>

As the title suggests, the story is less about the young Thomas and more about the complex lives of those around him. As Mayer points out, 'he is an outsider to the world of adults', without 'knowledge of the sexual games that Arnold is playing with Patricia and Edith, and he seems oblivious to their pain [...]. Outside of loss, he is in a state of pre-lapsarian innocence'.<sup>462</sup> This innocence, however, far from restricting the character-Thomas's perspective to a purely hermetic one, allows for his creative mind to transform the events into a language he is able to understand and articulate:

Arnold backed slowly down the path. 'I had to tell her that or she wouldn't have gone away. I had to, Patricia. You saw what she was like. I hate her. Cross my heart!'

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<sup>461</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 156 – 157.

<sup>462</sup> Ann E. Mayer, *Artists in Dylan Thomas' Prose Works: Adam Naming and Aesop Fabling* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 112.

‘Bang! Bang!’ cried the boy.<sup>463</sup>

The character-Thomas is able to ‘attain congruence between his perceptions and the exterior world’,<sup>464</sup> a congruence which I would suggest equates to a protective positioning, in defence of Patricia and Edith, and in defiance of Arnold. As with other stories in *Portrait*, the narrative emphasis begins with Thomas but ends with those around him, his own story borne out only in context of the more immediate narrative of others.

A similar effect is achieved in ‘Just Like Little Dogs’, in which the complicated love lives of Walter and Tom occupy the majority of the text. In a moment which echoes and foregrounds ‘One Warm Saturday’, Thomas meditates on his ‘lonely nightwalker’ persona as he listens to their story:

And I never felt more a part of the remote and overpressing world, or more full of love and arrogance and pity and humility, not for myself alone, but for the living earth I suffered on and for the unfeeling systems in the upper air [...] I leant against the wall of a derelict house in the residential areas or wandered in the empty rooms, stood terrified on the stairs or gazing through the smashed windows at the sea or at nothing [...] <sup>465</sup>

As in ‘Patricia, Edith, and Arnold’, ‘One Warm Saturday’ and ‘Old Garbo’, the character-Thomas acts as a narrator of the slum areas of Swansea, acquiescing to biographies of people from the slums but, in doing so, draws creative inspiration from them. By viewing himself within these scenes, amongst these people, Thomas accentuates his position as a member of (and witness to) a more complex society, drawn into the alienated slums where the sea, that great symbol of nature, can be viewed only through ‘smashed windows’.

Walter and Tom, who each marry a girl the other had spent the night with on the beach, are shown as embodying this alienated state, disregarded by the authorities (the title of the story

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<sup>463</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 156.

<sup>464</sup> Ann E. Mayer, *Artists in Dylan Thomas’ Prose Works: Adam Naming and Aesop Fabling* (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), p. 114.

<sup>465</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), pp. 182-183.

comes from a judge's description of Walter and Tom)<sup>466</sup> and finding themselves in relationships they would not otherwise have chosen, both feeling utterly incapable of effecting any change in their lives (they twice refer to their condition as 'curious' in the closing paragraphs).<sup>467</sup> The Thomas character, who listens attentively to their story, is almost entirely displaced (in terms of narrative incident), allowing for a separate 'portrait' to emerge. Though far from glorifying the proletariat (Walter and Tom are no heroes), the lack of any kind of judgemental narration or pointed prose does suggest an affinity with the plight of the two protagonists, and at the very end Thomas remarks, 'We all shook hands', thereby reaffirming his sense of kinship.

In contrast to the openly supportive atmosphere of Llanstephan or the trio of Patricia, Edith and the infant Thomas, the bourgeois suburban district of Swansea, as rendered in 'The Fight', appears distinctly cold and uncaring. As in 'A Visit', 'The Fight' has the young Thomas coming into contact with somebody with suicidal tendencies, namely Mrs. Bevan, whom he meets at his new friend's house. Unlike Thomas's grandfather, Mrs. Bevan is presented as a woman alone and without support, whose passive, lifeless gestures are the very antithesis of Thomas's grandfather's, who rides imaginary horses late into the night. Indeed, her whole appearance is antithetical to the grandfather who stands 'like a prophet who has no doubt':

Mrs Bevan didn't look all there. She stared at the table-cloth and made hesitant movements with her knife and fork. She appeared to be wondering which to cut up first, the meat or the cloth.<sup>468</sup>

Thomas's new friend, Dan, describes Mrs. Bevan as 'terribly mad. She doesn't know who she is. She tried to throw herself out of the window but [her husband] didn't take any notice, so she came up to our house and told mother all about it'.<sup>469</sup> In stark variance to the attention Thomas's grandfather receives from those around him, even Mrs. Bevan's husband

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<sup>466</sup> Just as in 'Patricia, Edith, and Arnold', 'Old Garbo' and 'Extraordinary Little Cough', the title of the story refers explicitly to characters other than Thomas, further reinforcing the notion that this a portrait not of an individual, but rather of a society and members of it.

<sup>467</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), pp. 184-5.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

does not ‘take any notice’ of her deep depression. That Mrs. Bevan must then take herself to a friend’s house to talk about it is again indicative of the isolation and neglect which she is the victim of, and the complete opposite of Thomas’s grandfather’s experience.

A similar criticism of the bourgeois insensitivity expressed in ‘The Peaches’ is again expressed here, however this time Thomas includes himself in the group to be rebuked, as we witness him revelling in the idea of a new ‘proper voice’ and a new social group:

‘Fifteen and three-quarters,’ said Mr Jenkyn, ‘that’s a very exact age. I see we have a mathematician with us. Now see if he can do this little sum.’  
He finished his supper and laid out matches on the plate. [...] ‘Oh, I’d like to see it very much,’ I said in my best voice. I wanted to come to the house again. This was better than home, and there was a woman off her head too. [...] It was almost as good being a hypocrite as being a liar; it made you warm and shameful.<sup>470</sup>

This response, to being asked if he would like to see a mathematical puzzle involving matches, reveals a young Thomas fully engaging with, and acting up to, what he perceives as a ‘better’ social group. Implicit in his reading of the group is a detached amusement at the sight of Mrs. Bevan, whom Thomas had earlier ‘stared at [...] with delight’. This detached attitude becomes, at the very end of the story, something rather more than just playful astonishment, developing into a sinister (almost murderous) disregard for her safety:

‘I wanted a little change of air,’ she said. She sat down in the wool on the sofa by the window.  
‘Isn’t it a close night?’ said Dan. ‘Would you like the window open?’  
She looked at the window.  
‘I can easily open it for you,’ Dan said, and winked at me.<sup>471</sup>

The disquieting glee with which the two boys set about orchestrating another suicide attempt both echoes and debunks any notion of Thomas as the sensitive poet he projects throughout ‘The Fight’. Instead, we are presented with a boy unaware of the very pains of death and loss, which he decries in the poem he reads to the dinner party, entitled ‘Frivolous is my Hate’. The

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<sup>470</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 166.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

poem itself is a melodramatic ode to necrophilia, heavily reliant, as Mr. Bevan points out, on Tennyson ('The influence is obvious, of course').<sup>472</sup> That it is patently bad is only part of the problem. What is more troubling is that it shows Thomas as the typical self-absorbed fantasist which in later stories he strives to brush off, suggesting that, when his attentions are turned solely inwards, towards some reverie of Lazarus-like potency, he is incapable of writing anything insightful or worthwhile. His insensitivity to external influences is therefore shown to render him a poor artist, which Thomas summarises at the very end of the story after he and his friend have tired of Mrs. Bevan's neurosis:

Mrs Bevan's face was pressed against the glass, her hook nose flattened, her lips pressed tight, and we ran all the way down Eversley Road in case she jumped.

At the corner, Dan said: 'I must leave you now, I've got to finish a string trio to-night.'

'I'm working on a long poem,' I said, 'about the princes of Wales and the wizards and everybody.'

We both went home to bed.

If we compare the description of Mrs. Bevan here with the final image of grandpa ('like a prophet who knows no doubt'), it is easy to see which of the two is the more sensitive and mature a portrayal. Indeed, although the character-Thomas of 'The Fight' is slightly older than that of 'A Visit', one could be forgiven for thinking that here he is younger. The language is more childlike, as 'a prophet who knows no doubt' is replaced with the witch-like Mrs. Bevan from whom Thomas runs in mock fear; the highly articulate rendering of his grandfather is replaced with a desire to write about 'the princes of Wales and wizards and everybody', though even this is unfulfilled given that he goes home to bed. By overlooking the dramatic potential of Mrs. Bevan, the story itself, which ends in an uneventful, unsatisfactory way, suffers. The *Jane Eyre* allusions are left untapped, drama is reduced to childish boasting, and all that comes of the day is sleep. In siding with 'the best house ever' rather than the 'woman off her head',

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<sup>472</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 168.

Thomas misses what will become more obvious to the older, more developed Thomas: the intrinsic interest of Mrs. Bevan. The fact that his 'long poem' about 'princes of Wales and wizards and everybody' is not forthcoming further reinforces the idea that it is not necessarily those with the 'best voice' who offer a source of inspiration, rather, as in other stories, it is those who are outside of the coterie of thinkers epitomized by Dan's household who make good material. As Thomas implies, an intolerant society, such as we see here, suffers for its restrictedness, becoming self-absorbed, unproductive and, like Mr. Bevan failing to notice his wife's suicide attempt, unaware of the world around it.

'Who Do You Wish Was With Us?' sees several of the ideas already touched upon brought together in the most compassionate story of *Portrait*. In it, we see Thomas and his friend Ray enjoying a long walk out towards the cliffs over Rhossili in an attempt to get away from the grey, unhealthy atmosphere of the town. Midway through, however, Ray's mood turns when he recalls caring for his brother and his father (as one lay dying of tuberculosis and the other suffering debilitating fits), tending to his wheelchair-bound mother, as well as remembering the loss of his sister to a sanatorium:

'[...] Mother couldn't move, and I had to cook as well, cook and nurse and change the sheets and hold father down when he got mad. It's embittered my outlook,' he said.<sup>473</sup>

Thomas's response to this is to focus Ray's attention first away from the thought of his family and onto the coastline around them, imagining an exchange between two seagulls as a way of lightening the mood. Similarly, as Ray is drawn further into his recollections, Thomas suggests that if they explore the coastline a little then they might find prehistoric cave drawings and 'make a fortune'<sup>474</sup> writing an article about them. Yet for every digression Thomas invents, Ray has a painful actuality with which to counter him, and the tension evident between Thomas's

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<sup>473</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 207.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

overtly frivolous imagination and the disturbing acuteness of Ray's memories is only resolved when Ray nearly falls to his death from the edge of the cliff they are walking along, landing beside Thomas instead. Even here though, Ray sees his life, and the face of his brother, flash before him as if to prove the indelibility of these thoughts and to compound his sense of loss.

Thomas, however, eventually finds a reconciliatory position between imagination and memory, one in which he reshapes the landscape to a point of safe exclusivity, thereby allowing Ray to 'wish' for his brother's presence:

As he kicked his legs in the sea, I said: 'This is a rock at the world's end. We're all alone. It all belongs to us, Ray. We can have anybody we like here and keep everybody else away. Who do you wish was with us?'<sup>475</sup>

By establishing an imaginative context that is both isolated from the real world whilst accessible to anybody from it, living or dead, Thomas enables Ray to use his painful memories to create a positive scene, one which is marked by its rules of admittance and devoid of illness. As Mayer suggests:

When [Thomas] first realizes his vocation as an artist he does so for the purposes of self-aggrandizement ('The Fight'); later, with a growing concern for others, he uses words to heal individuals ('Who do you wish') or to heal rifts in a community ('Old Garbo', 'One Warm Saturday').<sup>476</sup>

In counterpoint to the notion of artistic self-aggrandizement, Thomas here allows his imagination to become a catalyst for another person's creativity in the hopes that it may help them to console, even 'heal', themselves. Furthermore, it allows for a deeper understanding between the two of them, one which approaches symbiosis:

We did not speak as we climbed. I thought: 'If we open our mouths, we'll both say: "Too late, it's too late."' [...] We stood on the beginning of the Head and looked down, though both of us could have said, without looking: 'The sea is in.'<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 210.

<sup>476</sup> Ann E. Mayer, *Artists in Dylan Thomas' Prose Works: Adam Naming and Aesop Fabling* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 90.

<sup>477</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 210.

As Thomas stresses, their language, which had up until this point been used to communicate vastly differing ideas, becomes shared and negated, such that the character-Thomas perceives a common understanding which does not need to be articulated, but rather implicitly acknowledged, just as the natural turning of the tide is understood.

The extent to which Thomas is creatively displaced is, at the very end of the story, revealed in the ambiguous, unsure reference to a group of cyclists seen earlier in the story ('On the mainland, in the dusk, some little figures beckoned to us [...] I thought they were the cyclists').<sup>478</sup> The suggestion that these 'little figures' may be real or may be imagined ('I *thought*'), and, furthermore, that even Thomas himself cannot be sure which they are, shows just how much the character-Thomas has allowed his own imaginative will to become subservient to that of Ray. This, I think, approaches the kind of reciprocity that Mayer envisages when she writes of 'a sense of community acquired through art, through a shared story-telling', but the emphasis is, perhaps, somewhat reversed, in as far as it is a sense of the artistic that is ultimately acquired through community, as creativity and storytelling is used to 'heal' and reinforce a social grouping.

### 3.4 A Man With Visions Needs No Other Company

Thomas goes to great lengths to subvert and to parody the notion of the autobiographical form suggested by the title *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, with many stories barely featuring Thomas as a protagonist at all. Where he does appear in any substantially active sense, it is usually as support to another character, such as Lou, his grandfather or Raymond Price. Likewise, the manner in which the book ends, focusing on the 'small and hardly known and never-to-be-forgotten people of the dirty town', when viewed in context of this ever-diminishing presence, highlights the enormous importance Thomas places on the society around

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<sup>478</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 210.



him, over and above that of himself as an artist. By taking us on this picaresque journey through a Swansea seen at various times and at various ages, Thomas reveals what he believes to be good, as well as bad, about the society in which he grew up, and in such a way that does not attempt to propagandise, theorise or romanticise that society. His 'Provincial Autobiography' is therefore a testament to the commitment his fictionalised alter ego makes in 'Old Garbo' to 'put them all in a story by and by' and allow society itself (in particular those parts of it marginalised by poverty) to emerge through the medium of his own autobiographic *Künstlerroman*, thereby committing itself to a more lasting memory, to be 'never-to-be-forgotten'.

*Portrait* also marked a major stylistic break from the surrealistic, image-laden prose of previous works, such as those published in his 1939 prose and poetry collection, *The Map of Love*.<sup>479</sup> It foreshadowed major works such as *Under Milk Wood* and the film scripts in the close attention Thomas pays to colloquial dialogue and a heavier than usual reliance on plot and characterisation over linguistic invention. That Thomas should write stories which at times deal with manifestly political and economic issues (most notably poverty) suggests that, despite the self-effacing title of the collection, *Portrait* has at its centre a very serious intention to explore and expose these issues in a way which would be understood and acknowledged by as wide an audience as possible, without drifting into avantgardism, surrealism or, as with some of the scripts, propaganda. What is clear is that Thomas took a great interest in the welfare of society. From his many letters, most notably those to Bert Trick, it is possible to detect a sense of the need, typical of revolutionary movements of the time, to effect some change for the benefit of the proletariat, such as Thomas expressed in his reply to a *New Verse* questionnaire of 1934.

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<sup>479</sup> Parallel to this change in prose style, a clear change in his poetic writing style is also evident. See Jacob Korg, *Dylan Thomas* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 168.

Asked ‘Do you take a stand with any political or politico-economic party or creed?’, Thomas responded:

I take my stand with any revolutionary body that asserts it to be the right of all men to share, equally and impartially, every production of man from man and from the sources of production at man’s disposal, for only through such an essentially revolutionary body can there be the possibility of a communal art.<sup>480</sup>

There has been a great deal of debate regarding the above quote, which some, such as FitzGibbon, see as ‘Dylan at his worst’,<sup>481</sup> whilst others, like Golightly, view it as indicative of ‘Thomas’s position as a political artist’.<sup>482</sup> In line with Golightly’s view, I would be inclined to say that the latter applies to *Portrait*. The fact that he expresses this with ‘mostly pot-boilers’ ensures that the social biography he created is accessible to every member of society, be they artist or young dog. The tone may be less overtly rhetorical when compared to the radio works, however the underlying sense of Thomas as socially aware and politically engaged remains, as does the idea of Thomas using his art for a useful purpose.

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<sup>480</sup> Reprinted in Constantine FitzGibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (Aylesbury: First Sphere Books, 1970), p. 152.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid*, p. 152.

<sup>482</sup> Victor Golightly, ‘“Writing in dreams and blood”: Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea’, *Welsh Writing in English*, Vol. 8 (2003), 67-91 (p. 86).

## 4. UNDER MILK WOOD

Deirdre plays chess  
With Naisi, neither caring which will win,  
For both of them are doomed and yet their doom may bless

Posterity, who always must begin  
From the beginnings; Dylan knew that well  
And never stopped beginning [...] <sup>483</sup>

On 16<sup>th</sup> December 1952, Dylan Thomas's father died after nearly two decades of illness. The effect of this particular loss is easy to underestimate, but accounts from his wife, Caitlin Thomas, and Thomas's mother, Florrie, suggest that it was a terrible blow to the poet, his father being the man who had 'been responsible for all he had ever learnt'. <sup>484</sup> A few weeks later, on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1953, Thomas's neighbour and odd-job man, George 'Booda' Roberts, who was photographed carrying a much younger Thomas across the Swansea estuary at low tide in 1940, was accused of bludgeoning to death a seventy-seven year old spinster named Elizabeth Thomas, who, like Thomas himself, lived in the small Welsh village of Laugharne. <sup>485</sup> Less than a fortnight after this, on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1953, Thomas's friend Marged Howard-Stepney overdosed on sleeping pills, only a day after having drinks with Thomas on one of his frequent trips to London. On this very trip, Caitlin had her second abortion at a friend's house in Hammersmith, whilst Thomas, much like the first time Caitlin had been through this procedure, absented himself. <sup>486</sup> On 16<sup>th</sup> April 1953, as Thomas sailed out to America on another exhausting yet lucrative reading tour, his sister, Nancy, also died. <sup>487</sup> These were four terrible months for Thomas. Then, on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1953, after an intensive period of writing,

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<sup>483</sup> Louis MacNeice, 'Canto in Memoriam Dylan Thomas' in *A Garland for Dylan Thomas*, ed. by George Firmage (London: Vision Press Limited, 1966), p. 83.

<sup>484</sup> Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003), p. 341.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345. See also, Caitlin Thomas and George Tremlett, *Caitlin: A Warring Absence* (London: Sicker & Warburg, 1986), p. 173.

<sup>487</sup> Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003), p. 347.

reviewing, drafting and redrafting, *Under Milk Wood* was performed by a cast of six actors, including Thomas himself, at the Poetry Center of the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association in New York:

At 8:40 p.m. the house lights dimmed, and a single spot picked out Dylan on stage, in his role as narrator. Then, as his five fellow actors came into view, his Welsh lilt could be heard: 'To begin at the beginning...' For a couple of minutes, members of the audience remained silent and still, as they made efforts to picture 'the small town, starless and bible-black'. Then, with the arrival of Captain Cat, they realised they were not going to have to sit through a difficult avant-garde piece: they could sit back and enjoy themselves.<sup>488</sup>

Recordings of Thomas performing the work demonstrate that he read the opening dialogue of the play very much as he read his poetry, using pauses for dramatic effect and adjusting the speed of his reading in order to linger on certain phrases.<sup>489</sup> Thomas reads the following at pace: 'Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers, the movements and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight [...]' and then slows to conclude '[...] and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams'.<sup>490</sup> In performing the work in this way, Thomas reveals the interplay of the dual themes of the work, namely life and death. Indeed, the opening section of *Under Milk Wood* serves as a prelude to, or foreshadowing of, the work as a whole, rising and falling on 'the wishes and flight and fall and despairs' of the cast he gradually introduces.

In this regard, the opening monologue is akin to 'Prologue', Thomas's last complete poem, which he penned, with some difficulty, at the same time as working on *Under Milk Wood*.<sup>491</sup> The poem was intended to preface his collected works, and shares certain imagery with the play, such as the 'crow black' fishermen (as opposed to the 'crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea' of *Under Milk Wood*), the 'wound asleep | Sheep white hollow farms'<sup>492</sup> much

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<sup>488</sup> Douglas Cleverdon, *The Growth of Milk Wood* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd, 1969), p. 24.

<sup>489</sup> *Dylan Thomas Reads Under Milk Wood* (Alto 'take 2', 2010) [on CD].

<sup>490</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>491</sup> Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003), pp. 339 – 340.

<sup>492</sup> From readings by Thomas of the poem, we know that 'wound' should be read as in *wound-up*.

like the town that is ‘fast, and slow, asleep’, and ‘the stars of Wales’, which in the opening of the play is echoed in a boat called ‘*Star of Wales*’. More significantly, ‘Prologue’ sets the tone for the collection, with Thomas portrayed as building an ark on which to preserve the peoples, plants and animals of Wales as a flood approaches (the ark being his collection of poems), and in this way Thomas establishes, much as he does in the dialogue of the First Voice, the characters and images that we are about to witness, such as the ‘the king singsong owls’, the ‘ring dove | In the hooting, nearly dark | With Welsh and reverent rook’, the ‘jack | Whisking hare’, ‘old sea-legged fox, | Tom tit and Dai mouse’. We see this in *Under Milk Wood* when the First Voice introduces ‘the babies [...], the farmers, the fishers, the tradesmen and pensioners, cobbler, schoolteacher, postman and publican, the undertaker and the fancy woman, drunkard, dressmaker, preacher, policeman, the webfoot cocklewomen and the tidy wives’,<sup>493</sup> the majority of whom appear as specific characters in the play. What this chapter will argue is that *Under Milk Wood* brings together Thomas’s work as poet, scriptwriter, author of radio plays and broadcasts, and writer of literary prose, into a single expression of the many socialist themes that I have shown to be expressed throughout these various other forms of writing, and it does so specifically via these characters who are introduced at the very beginning of the play. This is not to suggest that the play is a political manifesto of any sort, rather that it distils many of Thomas’s previously articulated beliefs, which we may (and, indeed, I have) termed ‘political’ into a simplified message, one that is governed by love, by forgiveness, by community and by Nature. It is about how these aspects of life intermingle, how they are coloured by experience, by the very experience of living, and it is about death and the dead. It is, therefore, also about the history of the community itself.

The focus on community marks a subtle yet significant change in emphasis from the film scripts, radio drama and short stories. The same concerns with social division, poverty and

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<sup>493</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 13.

exploitation remain, however they are marked by a stronger sense of loss, a greater degree of emotional complexity and depth, and a more discernible desire on the part of Thomas to articulate why the lives of people matter, why a society should govern itself for the benefit of all, and what it means at a human level to organise a society around the people that constitute that society. It is an articulation of socialist politics devoid of exposition. Moreover, it is an articulation of these ideas set against traditional poetic ideas, such as love, grief and man's part in the processes of the natural world.

By closely analysing the text, it is possible to trace how the play evolved from the earlier drama and prose into this broader dialectic, and how Thomas sought to remove propaganda and polemic in favour of a more emotionally direct style of writing. It is essentially the same politicised message in support of social equality that we have seen in other works, but in *Under Milk Wood* the articulation is subtler, the sense of grief more pervasive, and the need for revival (seen in a number of the post-war films and radio dramas) is more closely aligned with traditional poetic ideas around death, nature and love than previously seen. That it was written during years of financial and emotional hardship, as well as physical decline for Thomas, gives the work a humility and depth not seen in the propagandistic works, nor to the same degree in the short stories written earlier in Thomas's career. For this reason, analysing the play for its socialist aspects relies on understanding how equality, grief, love and society are bound together by Thomas to form a view of a place and its people which speaks to the emotional aspects of Thomas's politics.

## 4.1 A Troubled Sanctuary

The inhabitants of the town sleep and dream in rooms where ‘yellowing dickybird-watching pictures of the dead’<sup>494</sup> hang on the walls above them, and, as we shall see, when they dream, they more often than not dream of the dead, the lost, or the otherwise unattainable. In *Under Milk Wood*, however, death is not portrayed as an entirely privative phenomenon. Rather, it has creative, generative qualities: the dead continue to inspire love, as well as prompt poems and songs, occasion sexual fantasies, and elicit bawdy humour. The dead, as much as the living, exert a strong influence on the tone of the ‘play for voices’ and offer as much insight as their earthly counterparts do, although to call them ‘counterparts’ is perhaps misleading, as there is no hint of dualism in Thomas’s representation of the living and the dead. If anything, the opposite holds true, in so far as they exist together, as a community, sharing homes and, in certain cases, even beds. Through various modes of invention (dreams and songs, for example), the dead and the living commune on an apparently equal basis. Barbara Hardy remarks that, in *Under Milk Wood*, the ‘complications of tragedy [...] are not even allowed to cast a faint shadow, [...] with the exception of the shadow of death’,<sup>495</sup> and this exception is significant.

With this in mind, we can examine Captain Cat (whose dream of ‘never such seas as any that swamped the decks of his *S. S. Kidwelly*’ put the audience at ease in New York), who is first presented as a dead man, ‘nibble[d] down to his wishbone’ by fish, as ‘the long drowned nuzzle up to him’:

FIRST DROWNED

Remember me, Captain?

CAPTAIN CAT

You’re Dancing Williams!

FIRST DROWNED

I lost my step in Nantucket.

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<sup>494</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>495</sup> Barbara Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 86.

## SECOND DROWNED

Do you see me, Captain? the white bone talking? I'm Tom-Fred the donkeyman ... we shared the same girl once ... her name was Mrs Probert

...  
[...]

## FIRST DROWNED

This skull at your earhole is

## FIFTH DROWNED

Curly Bevan. Tell my auntie it was me that pawned the ormolu clock.

## CAPTAIN CAT

Aye, aye, Curly.<sup>496</sup>

Captain Cat, dreaming of himself as a skeleton sinking 'down salt deep into the Davy dark',<sup>497</sup> falls amongst the remains of his shipmates, one a 'white bone talking', another just a skull. In many respects, this should be a nightmare. It should, at the very least, be depicted by Thomas as somehow distressing, yet the vision is nothing of the sort. Rather, it is strangely comforting. The bones he falls amongst 'nuzzle up to him' and their conversation is not morbid, but rather reminiscent. Captain Cat is pleased to be amongst the dead and responds without any sign of revulsion or apprehension. What Thomas presents is a reverie in which the dead are themselves, naturalistic and not concerned with revelations of eternal torment or the usual literary tropes, but with the commonplace, with evocative moments from their past, such as their time with the character Rosie Probert, or the guilt attached to pawning a relative's clock.

As the scene progresses, the voices of the drowned, far from making any grandiloquent metaphysical statements, assert nothing more than curiosity for life back home and, by extension, their normality. They ask about the things they miss, such as 'rum and lavabread', 'the tenors in Dowlais' and 'the cows in Maesgwyn'.<sup>498</sup> The abiding emotional context, as we

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<sup>496</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), pp. 15 – 16. It is perhaps worth noting that this edition, prepared by Douglas Cleverdon for The Folio Society, is the version given by Thomas to the B.B.C. and 'supplemented by a transcript of the final New York reading with its extra page' (*Ibid*, p. 8). There are a number of variations of the script (see Douglas Cleverdon, *The Growth of Milk Wood* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd, 1969)), however, in order to discuss the play in terms of a radio drama, this version seems the most appropriate.

<sup>497</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 15.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.



shall see throughout *Under Milk Wood*, is one informed by notions of acceptance of the dead, and, moreover, of love, a climate expressed by Captain Cat with his remark ‘Oh, my dead dears!’<sup>499</sup> that concludes the first of his dream sequences. It is indicative of the play as a whole that Captain Cat’s dream is so free of morbidity and is so easily enjoyed, as shown in Lycett’s description of the performance quoted above.<sup>500</sup> This is the essence of the more emotionally direct approach to socialist ideas described in the introduction, one where acceptance of, and love for, others is privileged above all else.

Captain Cat’s dream, though, recalls another of Thomas’s works, namely ‘Poem on his Birthday’. Begun four years before *Under Milk Wood* was first performed but not finished until 1951,<sup>501</sup> it was prompted by the occasion of Thomas’s thirty-fifth birthday (‘This sandgrain day in the bent bay’s grave’, as Thomas describes it, evoking both the sandy beaches of South Wales and the sands of time). From his writing shed in Laugharne, perched on a cliff overlooking the Taf Estuary (his ‘long tongued room’ in ‘his house on stilts’), Thomas observes how ‘finches fly | In the claw tracks of hawks’ and ‘small fishes glide | Through wynds and shells of drowned | Ship towns to pastures of otters’, each, instead of avoiding death, calmly pursuing the agent of their own destruction (or ‘Work at their ways to death’, as Thomas puts it). What is implicit in Captain Cat’s easy relationship with the dead is made explicit by ‘Poem

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<sup>499</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 17.

<sup>500</sup> It is interesting to note here that in the 2015 film adaptation of *Under Milk Wood* directed by Kevin Allen this sequence is, contrary to my own reading, portrayed as vaguely horrific, although much of the actual dialogue is omitted, such that the scene is more about the director’s visuals than the text itself. I would suggest that the dialogue is, as Allen may have found, incompatible with a reading of the scene in which Captain Cat’s dream is intended as a nightmare, and that the 1972 film version directed by Andrew Sinclair is a nearer approximation of how Thomas intended the scene to run. It is certainly more similar in tone to the surviving recording of Thomas’s New York reading than Allen’s version, if a little more emotional than the stage reading. It should be noted though that the language of the scene does, as mentioned, lend itself to a more sentimental reading of the passage, in as far the dead ‘nuzzle up’ to Captain Cat, the Third Drowned asks to be held by him, and the various objects and desires of home that they ask about are, on the whole, rather innocent (including robins, sparrows, daisies, ‘[t]iddlers in a jamjar’, ‘[r]ock-a-bye baby’ and if, when ‘she’ [presumably Gwyn, mentioned by the Fifth Drowned] smiles, there are dimples). The line ‘Oh, my dead dears!’ is unambiguous and full of mournful affection, so arguably Sinclair’s rendering of the dream sequence into a more overtly sentimental experience for the Captain is justified, and would, therefore, be more consistent with both the dialogue and the overall themes of love and loss throughout the play than Allen’s (notwithstanding the director’s artistic licence).

<sup>501</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 254.

on his Birthday': death is a natural part of life, and that by accepting this, the psychological revulsion that might otherwise be felt at the sure and certain knowledge of mortality is transformed into a redeeming, revelatory sense of appreciation for the dead and the living in totality:

Oh, let me midlife mourn by the shrined  
And druid herons' vows  
The voyage to ruin I must run,  
Dawn ships clouted aground,  
Yet, though I cry with tumbledown tongue,  
Count my blessings aloud:

Four elements and five  
Senses, and man a spirit in love  
Tangling through this spun slime (lines 76-84)  
[...]  
And the sea that hides his secret selves  
Deep in its black, base bones [...] (lines 87-88)

Thomas here imagines himself sinking through the 'spun slime' just as Captain Cat dreams of the sea 'sucking him down salt deep into the Davy dark'. In a similar fashion again to the dream, Thomas revels in the 'black, base bones' that contain 'his secret selves' (which for Captain Cat is the talk of Rosie Probert, one sailor's remorse at pawning an ormolu clock, and another's at having been unfaithful), though, in more general terms, what Thomas reveals represents, in a Christian sense, the history of man himself, the allusions to Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, Heaven and so forth contributing much to the language of the poem and its themes.

Again the horror is absent, replaced by a genuine desire to 'mourn' ('Oh, let me midlife mourn' – it is as if the poet is pleading), to communicate with a dead life – which for the poet is the past thirty-five years of his life, as well as his own inevitable death – to articulate his 'blessings' and to proclaim that man is 'a spirit in love', no longer even a living, corporeal being, but 'a spirit'. That the poem is an articulation of Christian faith (not 'an orthodox and

conventional acceptance of the Christian Church', as Ackerman notes)<sup>502</sup> is clear from the central themes, namely 'original sin, salvation, and damnation',<sup>503</sup> but the metaphysical trick that Thomas plays by identifying his own past with death (literally with the dead) is what makes the poem so effective. Thomas mourns for his own past and the dead in the same way, thereby undermining the absolute finality and otherness of death. It is redemptive, and brings the dead and the living into the same metaphysical space.

It is interesting to observe how Thomas had already imagined himself in the 'Davy dark' where 'the long drowned nuzzle up to him', just before he had Captain Cat dream of a similar descent. Captain Cat's reverie ends with 'Oh, my dead dears!', whilst Thomas's concludes with 'And my shining men no more alone | As I sail out to die'. In both instances, the emphasis is on others (either the five drowned sailors of Captain Cat's dream or the 'shining men' of the poem, who are the dead of the sixth stanza), which relocates the revelation of identification with the dead from a purely egocentric, therapeutic conceit into a social understanding and a common bond which, as mentioned, equalises the two (an approach similar to that seen in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, in which the protagonist becomes a secondary figure relative to the rest of the characters). In neither case does the protagonist experience isolation in the act of expiring, but neither is the setting that as of an *afterlife*. Thomas writes:

Dark is a way and light is a place,  
Heaven that never was  
Nor will be ever is always true,  
And, in that brambled void,  
Plenty as blackberries in the woods  
The dead grow for His joy. (lines 49-54)

This idea of the dead growing is central to the internal contradiction of the poem, the fundamental idea of death being a beginning and an end, a continuation and a termination. This

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<sup>502</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Works* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 158.

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

is a point repeated in Eynel Wardi's extensive study of the poem, which begins with her observation that:

'Poem on his Birthday' not only commemorates, but also repeats – in an attempt to work through – the unfinished business of its speaker's genesis. The burden of its symbolic narrative (stanzas 1-7) – the protagonist's redemptive, Dantesque 'midlife' journey to a visionary death at the bottom of the sea – is the speaker's corrective return to the traumatic site of an incomplete psychic birth in an oceanic, symbiotic womb-tomb, where pleasure and death are as yet undifferentiated.<sup>504</sup>

The anniversary of his birth is, for Thomas, a time to contemplate his death, and his birthday becomes a reason to celebrate and mourn simultaneously, until one becomes indistinguishable from the other; out of death comes hope and creativity, as MacNeice suggests when invoking the legend of Deirdre, quoted at the very beginning of this chapter.

For Wardi:

The speaker negates the maternal pole of the death instinct by symbolizing it, thus liberating himself from the deadening grip of the autoerotic fixation into the possibility of love, that is, into a desiring affirmation of self and world.<sup>505</sup>

This, I believe, is how we should approach *Under Milk Wood*, a play that is most commonly remembered for the farcical aspects and yet is simultaneously marked with great sorrow. Indeed, as I shall show, Wardi's phrase 'liberating himself from the deadening grip of the autoerotic fixation into the possibility of love' could readily be applied to *Under Milk Wood*, as could 'a desiring affirmation of self and world'. Thomas, writing in 1951, said of the work that it was 'an entertainment out of the darkness, of the town I live in'.<sup>506</sup> It is as much a requiem as a comedy, and to have such pain coincide with so much humour gives the work, at times, a note of hysteria.<sup>507</sup> However, as Walford Davies notes, when 'describing *Under Milk*

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<sup>504</sup> Eynel Wardi, *Once Below a Time: Dylan Thomas, Julia Kristeva, and Other Speaking Subjects* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 38.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>506</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 904.

<sup>507</sup> 'Any work that modulates so consistently between day and night, awake and asleep, youth and age, living and dead is bound to be, however comic, a *memento mori*'. (Introduction to Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. xxxv).

*Wood*'s wonderful comedy, our language often needs to be dual, to fall between light and shade'.<sup>508</sup> Furthermore, he asks us to 'remember that the play's period of gestation was Thomas's whole career, and that the hinterland of poetry, prose, film and broadcasts from which the play emerged was often a dark one'.<sup>509</sup> Recalling here that the traumatic four months during which the play was completed were marked by murder, suicide, the deaths of two close relatives, and what appears to have been, for Thomas, a difficult abortion, the hinterland could not have been much darker as he prepared for the first performance of his play.<sup>510</sup>

However, *Under Milk Wood* was not written solely against the backdrop of these terrible four months (although Thomas does seem, from accounts of the time, to have been working most intensely on the script in the lead up to the initial performances, perhaps as a consequence of rehearsals with the actors),<sup>511</sup> nor with war solely in mind, but was rather a project that occupied Thomas from as far back as 1943 whilst working on *Quite Early One Morning*, a broadcast talk that contains many of the ideas that would be revived a decade later in the play for voices.<sup>512</sup> Likewise, 'The Londoner' (1946) shares common characteristics with *Under Milk Wood*, and these have, at various times, been considered in works such as Cleverdon's *The Growth of Milk Wood*, in Maud's essay 'The London Model for Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*', as well as in the introduction to the definitive edition of the play written by Walford Davies. What is apparent from these studies (and many others) is that Thomas returned frequently, over a number of years, to the simple idea of writing about a small town and the community that lived within it. Thomas himself, in a letter of 1951 to Princess Margeurite

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<sup>508</sup> Introduction to Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. xii.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>510</sup> The first performance, as such, was on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1953 at the Fogg Museum, Harvard, for which Thomas played all of the parts. The first 'staged' production would have been the one Lycett alludes to and which I mention in the introduction to this chapter (Douglas Cleverdon, *The Growth of Milk Wood* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd, 1969), p. 24).

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Caetani (in whose quarterly, *Botthege Oscure*, Thomas hoped the work would appear), alludes to this idea and the central importance of it to the text:

[...] the piece will develop [...] through all the activities of the morning town – seen from a number of eyes, heard from a number of voices – through the long lazy lyrical afternoon, through the multifariously busy little town evening of meals & drinks and loves & quarrels and dreams and wishes, into the night and the slowing-down lull again and the repetition of the first word: Silence. And by that time, I hope to make you utterly familiar with the places and the people; the pieces of the town will fit together; the reasons for all these behaviours (so far but hinted at) will be made apparent; & there the town will be laid alive before you. And only you will know it.<sup>513</sup>

Thomas's description of *Under Milk Wood* makes apparent his desire that we, as listeners or as readers, come to know the town and its people as much as grasp any plot line or infer any moral, political or other message. Indeed, the narrative structure of the work is minimal, and is essentially contained in Thomas's description above: people sleep, dream, wake, go about their business, and then return to sleep. There is no epic narrative, no complex parable, nothing but the lives of the people, which is where our focus should be. What is significant for Thomas is that we 'know' the characters, the people, and that we understand them. Earlier in the same letter he suggests that the intention is for the audience to 'know the town as an inhabitant of it',<sup>514</sup> which reinforces the idea that it is through knowing them, through our own capacity to empathise, that we may understand the work. As Thomas notes, 'the town will be laid alive before you. And only you will know it', suggesting a more personal experience for the viewer, one which has a private, unique meaning to them which is born of this empathy, of this closeness to the characters.

I would therefore argue that *Under Milk Wood* is about little other than the people of Llareggub, and in this way could be seen as Thomas's *Ulysses*, sharing characteristics with Joyce's work that have been noted by past critics (such as Davies in his introduction to the

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<sup>513</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 905.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 904.

definitive edition of the work). These include having the action (such as it is, in both instances) occur during a single twenty-four hour period, the writers' emphasis on the private concerns and desires of a limited number of characters, and some of the linguistic devices that are employed by both Thomas and Joyce.<sup>515</sup> The significant difference, however, is that Thomas's work focuses on the community in totality, and on the interactions between the characters that constitute this community and the place itself, as if Llareggub, Milk Wood and the people who live there, form together part of a coherent whole (or, as Thomas puts it, 'the pieces of the town [...] fit together'), rather than, as is the case in *Ulysses*, focusing in great detail on a small number of principle characters, and their relationships with others and their home. In this regard, *Under Milk Wood* is almost, in conception, the very antithesis of *Ulysses*, being equally concerned with practically every occupant of a small town, rather than focusing on a handful of occupants of a larger city. As Davies points out, 'as early as 1932 Thomas and Bert Trick talked vaguely about writing a Welsh version [of *Ulysses*]'. However, as he concludes, '[b]eyond having in common the general notion of a set period of time during which a community is revealed, the influence is tenuous at best'.<sup>516</sup>

This notwithstanding, the influence of Joyce's work is apparent in *Under Milk Wood*, and the structure that Thomas took from *Ulysses* was clearly important in framing the events of the play, providing a clear beginning and end point to the drama, as well as offering a significant cultural precedent for using such a technique. Just as we saw with *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, Thomas was not averse to borrowing literary allusions. Thomas does in fact reference *Ulysses* in *Under Milk Wood*, but he does so in passing and only in the form of a knowing (perhaps only half-serious) nod to the closing words of Joyce's work, in the dreamt dialogue between two lovers:

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<sup>515</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. xiii.

<sup>516</sup> James A. Davies, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 235.

MR MOG EDWARDS  
Myfanwy, Myfanwy, before the mice gnaw at your bottom drawer will  
you say

MISS MYFANWY PRICE  
Yes, Mog, yes, Mog, yes, yes, yes.<sup>517</sup>

Hardy notes that:

In *Under Milk Wood* Joyce is there in the characters, he's there in the time scheme, he's there in the dream fantasy, he's there in the narrative monologues, he's there in the fun and flow. And just as Joyce's great Homeric celebration changes the way we read *The Odyssey*, so perhaps Dylan Thomas's sprightly and comic play can lighten the way we read Joyce, whose comedy is sometimes neglected.<sup>518</sup>

Hardy concludes by commenting that *Under Milk Wood* is an ambitious work, but '[w]hether its allusiveness is always conscious or not, it is present everywhere'. I would agree with the sentiment, such that even if the play cannot be viewed as an homage to, parody of, or 'Welsh version' of *Ulysses*, the influence undeniably exists, even if it is understated and largely light-hearted.

To return to the dead, and how they are very much a part of the community in *Under Milk Wood*, one of the clearest examples we find is in the character of Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard, 'widow, twice, of Mr. Ogmores, linoleum, retired, and Mr. Pritchard, failed bookmaker'.<sup>519</sup> Her day begins and ends with her two dead husbands, both of whom, 'maddened by besoming, swabbing and scrubbing, the voice of the vacuum-cleaner and the fume of polish' resulting from Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard's obsessive cleaning, 'ironically swallowed disinfectant'.<sup>520</sup> At the beginning of the play she 'wakes in a dream, and nudges in the ribs dead Mr. Ogmores, dead Mr. Pritchard, ghostly on either side',<sup>521</sup> revealing that Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard and her two deceased husbands live together, and even share a bed (one example of a cheerful ménage à

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<sup>517</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 18.

<sup>518</sup> Barbara Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 57.

<sup>519</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 24.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*



trois in *Under Milk Wood*, the other being the household of Mr. Dai Bread and his two wives). The comedic elements of their relationship betray the sense of (commitment to, even) love and memory above all else. The two dead husbands, we discover, do not haunt Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard in any aggressive or vengeful way, nor does Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard's dream betray any hint of guilt, despite the manner and reason for the separate deaths of her two husbands. Indeed, the initial impression of the husbands is that, in a reversal of the usual design for ghost stories, they remain (or are summoned) in order to be tormented, by the living, again.

The dialogue that follows is, however, bristling with repressed sexual desire, desire that is resolved only at the end of the play when this morning scene is replayed during the dusk sequence. Their first exchange, during which Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard informs the two dead husbands that 'Soon it will be time to get up' and demands that they tell her their 'tasks, in order' (a rather long list which includes Mr. Ogmores stating that 'I must put my pyjamas in the drawer marked pyjamas', 'I must take my cold bath which is good for me' and 'I must dress behind the curtain and put on my apron')<sup>522</sup> is echoed at the end of the play, when Thomas returns to the bedroom of Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard. The earlier scene is repeated but altered to reveal the underlying sexual dynamic of the three as imagined or dreamt by Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard:

MRS OGMORE-PRITCHARD

Husbands,

*She says in her sleep. There is an acid love in her voice for one of the two shambling phantoms. Mr Ogmores hopes that it is not for him. So does Mr Pritchard.*

I love you both.

MR OGMORE [With terror]

Oh, Mrs Ogmores.

MR PRITCHARD [With horror]

Oh, Mrs Pritchard.

MRS OGMORE-PRITCHARD

Soon it will be time to go to bed. Tell me your tasks in order.

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<sup>522</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 25.

MR OGMORE & MR PRITCHARD

We must take our pyjamas from the drawer marked pyjamas.

MRS OGMORE-PRITCHARD [Coldly]

And then you must take them off.<sup>523</sup>

The abrupt end to the tasks, in counterpoint to the list that is recited during the dawn sequence (when putting away the pyjamas is the first of fourteen ‘tasks’), as well as the demand for sexual intercourse with both of them and the note from Thomas that Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard speaks ‘coldly’, suggests that her character, despite the outward pose of propriety we see time and again throughout the play, is beset by a contradiction, namely her continued love for, and desire for, her two dead spouses, love and desire which is ‘acid’ and unrequited. She is presented as a woman incapable of expressing her love, who is neurotic about cleanliness in the way that Aunt Annie in ‘The Peaches’ was neurotic about it (although expressed to an absurd degree), and she is, as we see in the exchange between Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard and the postman, Willy Nilly (in which she states that she doesn’t want ‘persons in my *nice clean* rooms breathing all over the chairs’) determined to be alone, despite being the owner of a guest house. The dark humour which informs the exchange between Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard and her dead husbands distracts the audience from the unfortunate nature of the three: it masks the two suicides and parodies the neurosis of Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard. Further dark humour can be found in an exchange about Mr. Ogmores and Mr. Pritchard earlier in the play, when two of the women of the town (part of the chorus of the play, as it were) mention that Mr. Pritchard ‘looked at [guests] undressing through the keyhole’, and that Mr. Ogmores was ‘a proper gentleman’, ‘even though he hanged his collie’.<sup>524</sup>

That her two husbands are in Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard’s thoughts when she wakes and when she goes to bed is, however, quite telling. Thomas, in the letter to Princess Caetani quoted

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<sup>523</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), pp. 81-82.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

above, states that Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard ‘will keep no boarders because they cannot live up to the scrupulous & godlike tidiness of her house and because death can be the only boarder good enough for her in the end’.<sup>525</sup> This forced retreat into the perfectly maintained mausoleum of her guesthouse does not (as implied by Allen’s recent film adaptation) suggest that Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard is somehow a sexual sadist, rather that she dwells in the past. Thomas’s description of her, which precedes ‘And then you must take them off’, suggests as much, when he writes ‘Mrs Ogmores-Pritchard [...] sits, erect as a dry dream on a high-backed hygienic chair and wills herself to cold, quick sleep’.<sup>526</sup> The phrase ‘erect as a dry dream’ is a curious one, alluding to phallic arousal but also, perhaps, a reference to ‘wet’ dreams (appropriate given the subsequent thoughts of Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard), although here the censors would undoubtedly have drawn the line. Using ‘dry’ instead of ‘wet’ has, therefore, the effect of an acynon, suggesting the latter by being the very opposite, especially when used in the sentence alongside ‘erect’. That she ‘wills’ herself to sleep suggests, as I say, a desire to be with her husbands, but the ‘dry’ aspect, even if it does imply the opposite, hints that her desires will not be fulfilled in the strictest sense. Davies notes the importance of remembering the origins of *Under Milk Wood*, and they are especially pertinent here. He states:

[...] *Under Milk Wood*, like all the best comedy, has a serious purpose. One way of understanding that purpose is to begin with the circumstances out of which the feature emerged, the age of austerity that, through the 1940s, was also the nuclear aftermath to the nightmare of World War II. The extent to which Thomas was haunted by such events can be seen from his ideas for ‘The Town That Was Mad’: the town was to be cordoned off, ‘barbed wire was strung about it and patrolled by sentries’. FitzGibbon commented that such ideas emerged ‘after the revelations of the German concentration camps’. [...] *Under Milk Wood*, developing as it did from ‘The Town That Was Mad,’ is centrally about escaping from the world, but, we quickly realize, into what is at best a troubled sanctuary.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 905.

<sup>526</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 80.

<sup>527</sup> James A. Davies, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 237.

Given Thomas's description of Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard, and in spite of her respectable, overtly ordered appearance, she is, like so many of the residents of Llareggub, deeply damaged and seeking comfort in, or coming to terms with, a painful private past. As Davies puts it, what the residents of the play find is a 'troubled sanctuary', one where comfort is haunting and being haunted is to find comfort. It is captivated by escapist fantasies such as Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard's, but also subject to, and a victim of, the past, which is disruptive, persistent and troubling. For many people of Thomas's generation, and the generation of his parents, this would be a familiar enough problem. In *Reminiscences of Childhood*, Thomas writes that, 'Beyond that unknown Wales [...] lay England which was London and the country called the Front, from which many of our neighbours never came back. It was a country to which only young men travelled'.<sup>528</sup> Similarly, Thomas talks about the Second World War in *Return Journey*, when, upon visiting his old school, he asks, 'What names did he know of the dead? Who of the honoured dead did he know such a long time ago?'. This is followed by a list of twelve names, delivered as if reading from a war memorial.<sup>529</sup> Loss on such a scale, as well as its effect on communities, is nearly impossible to quantify. However, the sense of it, the memory of it, would have been abiding, so when Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard yearns for the loved ones of her past, she would likely have had an audience listening who could understand her and, to an extent, would empathise with her. Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard very clearly (and quite literally) fails to liberate herself 'from the deadening grip of the autoerotic fixation into the possibility of love, that is, into a desiring affirmation of self and world',<sup>530</sup> and she is, consequently, alone and 'acid' in her love, and evidently unable to come to terms with the past.

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<sup>528</sup> Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992), pp. 16-17.

<sup>529</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 320.

<sup>530</sup> Eynel Wardi, *Once Below a Time: Dylan Thomas, Julia Kristeva, and Other Speaking Subjects* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 38.

The past itself is a curious thing in *Under Milk Wood*, as shown in the following description of the town:

FIRST VOICE

Stand on this hill. This is Llareggub Hill, old as the hills, high, cool, and green, and from this small circle of stones, made not by the druids but by Mrs Beynon's Billy, you can see all the town below you sleeping in the first of the dawn.<sup>531</sup>

The almost tautological 'old as the hills' used to describe Llareggub Hill has a self-reflexive quality, emphasizing the age of the setting with a common idiom but also focusing the attention squarely on the setting itself, as if the only useful referent in *Under Milk Wood* is the world that it creates internally. It certainly simplifies the description (Thomas does not ask us here to imagine any other site against which to compare Llareggub Hill, so our imagination stays fixed on this one place), but it also has the effect of making the description more intimate. This approach of establishing a narrow focus on, and an intimacy with, the place is repeated in the description of the stones, which are 'made not by the druids but by Mrs Beynon's Billy'. It is as if the history of the place is entirely self-contained, such that the most antique-looking features of the land are in fact the product of one of its youngest progenies. Thomas added a note to the text to suggest that this idea would either be repeated or replaced by the following: 'There are cave-paintings, painted by Mrs Beynon's Billy. He also runs a side line of flint arrows'.<sup>532</sup> This sense of a self-contained community, of one that is actively generating its own past through the creation of druidic stones and cave paintings, further enhances the very sense of the community – it creates its own present and its own past, its own myths, its own history, and even Nature plays a part in this myth – and place-creation. Billy Beynon, a child, constructs markers to the long since dead, as if creating, in a playful act, his own ancestors. Thomas's description of Billy is interesting too, using the colloquial form 'Mrs Beynon's Billy', further enhancing the sense of familiarity, of closeness, with the community, but also pointing to his

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<sup>531</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 32.

<sup>532</sup> Douglas Cleverdon, *The Growth of Milk Wood* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd, 1969), p. 37.

lineage and his place within this community as the son of the butcher's wife, reminding the listener of traditional Welsh surnames where 'ap' would be used to denote the parentage of males (such as 'Llywelyn ap Gruffudd', or Llywelyn son of Gruffudd).

The invented history of Llareggub is returned to at the end of the play, during the closing sequence, as dusk turns to night. Billy Beynon's actions are given a different slant, suggesting an ambiguity in their meaning that again feeds into the communal forming of identity:

#### FIRST VOICE

Llareggub Hill, writes the Reverend Jenkins in his poem-room, that mystic tumulus, the memorial of peoples that dwelt in the region of Llareggub before the Celts left the Land of Summer and where the old wizards made themselves a wife out of flowers.<sup>533</sup>

The view of the Reverend Jenkins is that the hill itself contains the long since dead ancestors of the town ('that mystic tumulus'), that it is a 'memorial' to the very peoples that move and inspire him. The significance of this comes when we ask why Billy Beynon placed the stones on Llareggub Hill at all. If we view the placing of them as playful or a childish prank (which would be supported in part by Thomas's note to expand the role with 'cave paintings' and 'a side line in flint arrows') then one may not necessarily exist, but if we view it as a part of something 'mystic', in keeping with the rest of the action of the play, then his act becomes, like the Reverend's, devotional, further establishing the link between this child of Llareggub and its distant past. Viewed in this way, Billy Beynon is unconsciously prompted by his ancestors to undertake their druidic observances, which in the context of the work is not that far-fetched at all. Moreover, Llareggub's future, Billy Beynon, essentially creates its past. Even the young contribute to the building of the troubled sanctuary.

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<sup>533</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), pp. 85-86.

To return to Davies' point that 'our language often needs to be dual, to fall between light and shade', one could add that our understanding of the location and the people that Thomas imagines has to balance action and remembrance, to embrace both simultaneously, to see creation/destruction less as a cycle and more as concurrently occurring events, just as Thomas described them in 'Poem on his Birthday'. In much the same way as the people of Llareggub's dreams seemingly intermingle, so too do the past and the present. Take, for example, Captain Cat's dream of Rosie Probert, in which she asks him to recall and describe the sea ('What seas did you see, | Tom Cat, Tom Cat, | In your sailing days | Long long ago?').<sup>534</sup> As we saw in the dream which opens the play (in which Captain Cat remembers his dead crewmen and which foreshadows this dream of Rosie Probert), here Captain Cat recalls a dead lover who, like the sailors, knows that she is dead and seems troubled by it. She also asks to be reminded of, and remembered to, the living, but her dialogue is darker, perhaps because the love Captain Cat feels for her is deeper (the First Voice tells us that he has 'I Love You Rosie Probert' tattooed on his belly, whilst the Second Voice states that 'One voice of all he remembers most dearly as his dream buckets down').<sup>535</sup> She says:

Remember her.  
 She is forgetting.  
 The earth which filled her mouth  
 is vanishing from her.  
 Remember me.  
 I have forgotten you.  
 I am going into the darkness of the darkness forever.  
 I have forgotten that I was ever born.<sup>536</sup>

Rosie's sadness comes not from death, but from non-existence, from a fear of ceasing to be. First, she forgets her death, with the earth that she was buried in 'vanishing from her', and then she forgets her birth, as if erasing her life from the final event to the first. She also forgets Captain Cat, the one dreaming of her, and so the idea of the 'darkness of the darkness forever'

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<sup>534</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 74.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

should be viewed as the loss of the memory of a person, which in the terms of the play more accurately reflects the state of being deceased. So long as she is remembered, Rosie is as much alive as anyone else, but when Captain Cat starts to forget her, then she truly dies.

The section is followed by the passage:

CHILD

Look,

FIRST VOICE

says a child to her mother as they pass by the window of Schooner House,

CHILD

Captain Cat is crying.

FIRST VOICE

Captain Cat is crying,

CAPTAIN CAT

Come back come back,

FIRST VOICE

up the silences and echoes of the passages of the eternal night.

CHILD

He's crying all over his nose,

FIRST VOICE

says the child. Mother and child move on down the street.

CHILD

He's got a nose like strawberries,

FIRST VOICE

the child says; and then she forgets him too.<sup>537</sup>

Thomas uses the little girl and the mother, moving away from Schooner House, to reflect the idea of the memory of Rosie Probert fading from Captain Cat's mind. The child and Rosie become almost synonymous, such that when Captain Cat says 'Come back' he says it twice, and the child, like Rosie, 'forgets him too' as she moves away. The interplay between Captain Cat, his dreamt Rosie Probert, and the world outside Schooner House, coalesce in the image of 'the silences and echoes of the passages of the eternal night', into which Captain Cat cries, along which Rosie Probert moves, and that are mirrored by the mother and the child

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<sup>537</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 76.



walking away down the cobbled streets. In the logic of the play, it might be said that the child is Rosie, and that by existing in the present, the child is undoing or replacing the memory of Rosie by re-telling her story again (by beginning at the beginning, as it were). Indeed, the child says to her mother during this passage ‘Nogood Boyo gave me three pennies yesterday but I wouldn’t [...]’, but without stating what it was that she would not do. The inference is, however, sexual, echoing Rosie’s work as a prostitute (‘fleets by the dozen have anchored for the little heaven of the night’,<sup>538</sup> to use Thomas’s euphemistic phrase) with the child being offered money in exchange for sexual activity. Because the girl is, to an extent, Rosie, and therefore understands Nogood Boyo’s intentions, she does not take the money. However, again in the context of the logic of the play, it seems only a matter of time before history repeats itself and the child’s name is tattooed on a different sailor’s stomach.

As was seen in ‘One Warm Saturday’, ‘Old Garbo’, and *The Doctor and the Devils*, prostitution is dealt with in a matter of fact manner, that it is represented as being very much a part of the social fabric. That it is also, to an extent, romanticised by dint of being described by Captain Cat serves only to draw the attention of the audience away from the economic exploitation of Rosie (and the child, who will become her and repeat her life and occupation) onto the abiding sense of acceptance, towards the lack of judgmentalism, and to the love that is at the heart of the community. Rosie is neither ostracised nor devalued as a consequence of her occupation, and nor will the child be. Instead, Rosie becomes, through the memories of Captain Cat, a symbol of romantic love, thereby enabling Thomas to allude to the edifying effects of social equality without needing to address the exploitative aspects of prostitution, and is one of the many examples of the ‘complications of tragedy’ that Hardy notes ‘are not even allowed to cast a faint shadow’.<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>538</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 73

<sup>539</sup> Barbara Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 86.

## 4.2 ‘Milk waking Wood’

Children play a significant part in *Under Milk Wood*, through their songs primarily, and they help us to understand the way that the community functions. The ‘three pennies’ mentioned by the girl above allude to a song that Captain Cat overhears from his window ‘open to the Spring sun tides’ outside which ‘naughty forfeiting children tumble and rhyme on the cobbles’.<sup>540</sup>

### GIRLS’ VOICES

Gwennie call the boys  
They make such a noise.

### GIRL

Boys boys boys  
Come along to me.

### GIRLS’ VOICES

Boys boys boys  
Kiss Gwennie where she says  
Or give her a penny.  
Go on, Gwennie.

The girl then kisses Billy (presumably Billy Beynon, the butcher’s son), Jonnie Cristo, and is finally refused by a boy called Dicky ‘[b]ecause [his] mother says [he] mustn’t’.<sup>541</sup> Thomas here, and elsewhere, evokes self-evidently childish language whilst alluding to the sexual themes of the play. As Goodby notes, the ‘sexual symbolism is both blatant and innocent, in accordance with Llareggub’s emotional economy, poised between infant and adult sexuality, between voyeuristic desire and physical enjoyment’. He continues, ‘[i]f the adult characters are child-like in their nostalgia and naïvety, the children are knowing, though still innocent’.<sup>542</sup> This oscillation between knowledge and innocence is part of the charm of the play, one which cannot resolve itself into a single perception of desire or paradigm of virtuousness. We see this

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<sup>540</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 63.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66.

<sup>542</sup> John Goodby, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 420.

at the end of the work, when the First Voice tells us that Llareggub is ‘a greenleaved sermon on the innocence of men’ to the Reverend Jenkins, just as Mr. Waldo makes love to Polly Garter in the woods and as Polly sings to herself of her lost love, ‘little Willy Wee who is dead, dead, dead’ (whose name, ‘Little Willie Weasel’, again evokes the childlike aspects of the play).<sup>543</sup> It is wholly right, therefore, that children play such a significant role, their voices reminding the audience of the inherent duality of the community. The play also ends by telling us that ‘The Wood’ (Thomas’s capitalisation) ‘is a God-built garden to Mary Ann Sailors, who knows there is Heaven on earth’, and this quasi-Edenic quality of the location is typified by an equally ambiguous sexuality, such that Llareggub and Milk Wood appear to be simultaneously both pre- and post-lapsarian. Mary Ann Sailors (who dreams of ‘The Garden of Eden’)<sup>544</sup> remarks earlier in the play that ‘It is Spring in Llareggub in the sun in my old age, and this is the Chosen Land’ followed by Thomas’s note that ‘[a] choir of children’s voices suddenly cries out on one, high, glad, long, sighing note’,<sup>545</sup> which in part parodies her belief but it also reminds the listener of the innocence she embodies and perceives (the First Voice informs us that she says this to herself ‘very softly’ - despite the direction having her say this ‘Loudly’ - ‘as she looks out at Llareggub Hill from the bedroom where she was born’).<sup>546</sup>

The perception of the place by its residents plays a fundamental role in maintaining this balance of innocence and desire. The children, when they are playing their kissing game, mention several places, namely ‘Goosegog Lane’, ‘Llareggub Hill’ and ‘Milk Wood’, as well as the river into which they intend to dunk Dicky for failing to kiss Gwennie on account of his mother’s advice. Llareggub Hill is where Mary Ann Sailors looks to as the ‘Chosen Land’, and Goosegog Lane is mentioned in Reverend Jenkin’s ‘morning service’, as well as the river. He proclaims:

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<sup>543</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), pp. 88-89.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

But let me choose and oh! I should  
Love all my life and longer

To stroll among our trees and stray  
In Goosegog Lane, on Donkey Down,  
And hear the Dewi sing all day,  
And never, never leave the town.<sup>547</sup>

Given the context, Thomas's use of the word 'stray' in connection to Goosegog Lane could be read as a deliberate reflection of the moral permissiveness that is apparent in much of the play and to which the Reverend returns in his 'sunset poem', when he observes that 'We are not wholly bad or good | Who live our lives under Milk Wood,'<sup>548</sup> a sentiment which feels as much directed to the listener as to the God he addresses. That his prayer is followed so neatly by the cobbler's actions ('Jack Black prepares once more to meet his Satan in the Wood')<sup>549</sup> further enhances the importance of the characters' varying perspectives of place in the play. 'Off to Gomorrah!' Jack Black says, as he heads out 'into the already sinning dusk' in his 'religious trousers, their flies sewn up with cobbler's thread'.<sup>550</sup> The contrast between the view of the Reverend and the cobbler could not be starker, despite the religious aspects of both.

As the town drifts into evening, Captain Cat 'sails to see the dead', amongst them Rosie Probert, who describes herself as 'Rosie, with God. She has forgotten dying'.<sup>551</sup> This statement (one could not call it an admission) restarts the cycle of her existence within the play and reflects the cyclical nature of *Under Milk Wood*. Rosie does 'come back' as Captain Cat asked, but it is at this moment in the day, at 'already sinning dusk' when 'the creased water sighs the streets close under Milk waking Wood [...]'.<sup>552</sup> The implication is that, as those *under* Milk Wood fall asleep, the wood itself awakens. The imagery is, moreover, sexual, 'the creased

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<sup>547</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 35.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

water' with its 'sighs' suggesting, perhaps, female genitalia, the 'Milk waking Wood', on the other hand, alluding to both the phallus and to semen. Once again, we have the 'troubled sanctuary' that Davies describes, a place of escape that itself holds a threat, that is both 'the Chosen Land' and Gomorrah, and that is simultaneously both creative and destructive.

Polly Garter and Mr. Waldo are making love in the wood at this point in the narrative, and the accumulation of images and allusions presents this Eden as more pantheistic, even Hellish if we remember that Jack Black has gone out there to 'meet his Satan'. Indeed, Cherry Owen, asleep on a gravestone and awoken by Organ Morgan (who mistakes Owen for Bach), responds to the latter by saying 'To hell with you', whilst the description of the 'Milk waking Wood' includes 'whose every tree-foot's cloven in the black glad sight of the hunters of lovers',<sup>553</sup> a reference to Jack Black's perception of the place but also suggestive of something more sinister (there are multiple 'hunters' and 'lovers'). The quasi-Eden is also a quasi-Hell, and this is foreshadowed by Thomas when Mae Rose-Cottage (whose name echoes that of Mary Ann Sailors) is 'lying in clover, listening to the nannygoats chew, draw[ing] circles of lipstick round her nipples' and says:

MAE ROSE-COTTAGE

I'm *fast*. I'm a bad lot. God will strike me dead. I'm seventeen. I'll go to hell,

SECOND VOICE

she tells the goats.<sup>554</sup>

In having her state 'I'm seventeen', Thomas links her to Mary Ann Sailors, who declares, much earlier in the play, 'I'm eighty-five years three months and a day!',<sup>555</sup> and we can see again the interconnectedness and self-referential nature of the characters and the place. Just as the child who refuses money for some unknown sexual act from Nogood Boyo foreshadows, even embodies, the diminishing figure of Rosie Probert, Mae Rose-Cottage is becoming the aging

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<sup>553</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 88.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Mary Ann Sailors, as if past and present are contained in a short, narrow cycle of death and self-renewal. This duality is reflected in the respective outlooks of Mary and Mae, one who revels in a Pagan field, the other who sees that field as the Garden of Eden. The wood, therefore, is likewise neither Eden nor Hell, but rather a symbol, a vessel into which the characters project their feelings. It is, to quote Reverend Jenkins' poetry, neither 'wholly bad or good', much like the people who live below it. This is also reflected in the Reverend Jenkins himself, a man who responds to Polly Garter's lewd song about 'Tom, Dick and Harry' with typical acceptance and positivity: 'Praise the Lord! We are a musical nation'.<sup>556</sup> For this reason perhaps, and others, Davies describes Jenkins as 'one of Thomas's most interesting and misunderstood creations'.<sup>557</sup>

Polly Garter's song, which the Reverend Jenkins 'stops outside the Welfare Hall to hear', offers another example of Thomas interweaving love, death and memory, recounting, with a mix of bawdy humour and wistful melancholy typical of the play, the romantic exploits of a woman who, despite all the men she had loved, 'loved best awake or asleep'<sup>558</sup> one called 'Little Willy Weasel' and whom she remembers most fondly. Writing to Princess Caetani in 1951, as the play was developing, Thomas said of Polly Garter that she 'has many illegitimate babies because she loves babies', and the simplicity of this statement is at the heart of many of the characters of *Under Milk Wood*, all of whom 'by their own rights, are ordinary & good', Thomas continues.<sup>559</sup> The illegitimacy of Polly Garter's children is a cause of sporadic opprobrium throughout the play from the chorus of women who gather in the town square, however this is offset by more sympathetic characters, such as Reverend Jenkins, Captain Cat and the narrative Second Voice, who remarks:

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<sup>556</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 61.

<sup>557</sup> James A. Davies, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 238.

<sup>558</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 60.

<sup>559</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), pp. 905 – 906.

Can you hear the dumb goose-hiss of the wives as they huddle and peck or flounce at a waddle away? Who cuddled you when? Which of their gandering hubbies moaned in Milk Wood for your naughty mothering arms and body like a wardrobe, love?<sup>560</sup>

That Thomas has the narrator defend one character and rebuke others reinforces the notion of a sympathetic storyteller, much like the Reverend. The language Thomas uses is deliberately colloquial, mocking the gossiping women at one moment and then highlighting the irony of their situation the next. The subtlety of this dialogue, though, is in its tonal similarities to the words spoken by Captain Cat, as if the narrator is speaking for him. His own remarks on the women around the water pump, which precede the appearance of Polly Garter, show this:

CAPTAIN CAT

All the women are out this morning, in the sun. You can tell it's spring. [...] Can't hear what the women are gabbing round the pump. Same as ever. Who's having a baby, who blacked whose eye, seen Polly Garter giving her belly an airing, there should be a law, seen Mrs Beynon's new mauve jumper, it's her old grey jumper dyed [...] <sup>561</sup>

The disjointed phrasing and dry humour mock the women who congregate by the town pump, but there is also the implied defence of Polly Garter (those who ridicule Polly are in turn ridiculed by the Captain) and this serves to foreshadow the 'dumb goose-hiss' passage quoted above. Pre-empting the address at the end of the Second Voice's dialogue, Captain Cat greets Polly Garter with 'Hullo, Polly my love.'<sup>562</sup>

Similarly, the quote relating to Billy Beynon's druidic stones mentioned earlier is followed by the 'Voice of a Guide-Book', recalling the technique used in 'The Londoner' with the 'Voice of an Expert'. In this passage we again see the close nature of the community in *Under Milk Wood*. The 'Voice of a Guide-Book' informs us:

Less than five hundred souls inhabit the three quaint streets and the few narrow by-lanes and scattered farmsteads that constitute this small, decaying watering-place which may, indeed, be called a 'back-water of life' without disrespect to its natives who possess, to this day, a salty individuality of their own.<sup>563</sup>

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<sup>560</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 51.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

As Davies notes, the language here is well chosen for its comedic value,<sup>564</sup> Thomas's use of 'souls' and 'natives' being especially effective at communicating a sense of superiority in the disinterested voice of the guide ('an exquisite thrust at the patronization of the regions', as Davies calls it).<sup>565</sup> Its inclusion by Thomas prompts us, the audience, to mock, or recoil from, the description of the guide-book, as well as to question whether it is a 'decaying watering-place' at all, and whether it might, therefore, actually justifiably be called a 'back-water of life' without 'disrespect' to those who live within it. The town is stirring at this point, and these phrases come after a description of the 'town [rippling] like a lake in the waking haze'.<sup>566</sup> The contrast between 'decaying watering-place' and 'back-water of life' with the romantic, almost Pre-Raphaelite image of the town could not be more obvious. The former suggests a dull, stagnant place, whilst the latter portrays a place of dreamlike beauty, the differing subjective stances highlighting the views of the 'outside' world and the interior life of the town. The favourable description is given by the First Voice, which in the letter to Princess Caetani quoted above is described by Thomas as 'really a kind of conscience, a guardian angel'.<sup>567</sup> This explanation of the role makes explicit the link between the voice (presumably the Second Voice as well)<sup>568</sup> and the town. It is more than just a narrator, rather it is an ethereal presence that knows everything, sees everything, that is inextricably linked to the places and the people it describes, as if simultaneously above them and one of them. Indeed, following the 'Voice of the Guide-Book', the First Voice says: 'The principality of the sky lightens now, over *our* green

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<sup>564</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. xxvi.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>567</sup> Dylan Thomas: *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 905.

<sup>568</sup> 'It became clear that the purpose of the division of the narration into a First Voice and a Second Voice was to alleviate the burden on the actors taking those parts and to achieve limited effects of variation through the different timbre of their voices. [...] It is not as if Thomas had made the First and Second Voices distinguishable through traits of speech patterns, imagery, personality, or depth of soul'. Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p.xi. As Davies notes, Cynthia Davis, in her essay 'The Voices of "Under Milk Wood"', does make a case for the two voices fulfilling separate functions (one an 'artist' figure, the other a voice of the unconscious), however it is, as Davis also remarks, perhaps a rather unconvincing argument.



hill, into spring morning larked and crowed and belling' (the italics are mine), which, as well as drawing the audience further into the play, pointedly notes that the First Voice is just as much a part of the town as the other characters, albeit in a more omniscient, formless sense.

The 'Voice of the Guide-Book' continues:

Though there is little to attract the hillclimber, the healthseeker, the sportsman, or the weekending motorist, the contemplative may, if sufficiently attracted to spare it some leisurely hours, find, in its cobbled streets and its little fishing harbour, in its several curious customs, and in the conversation of its local 'characters', some of that picturesque sense of the past so frequently lacking in towns and villages which have kept more abreast of the times.<sup>569</sup>

The description is deliberately contemporaneous with the composition of *Under Milk Wood*, breaking from the abiding sense of poetic timelessness of the play and instead evoking images of the burgeoning middle class who could afford to take a holiday or enjoy a weekend break (people very unlike the residents of Llareggub). The 'hillclimber, the healthseeker, the sportsman, or the weekending motorist' were able to spend 'leisurely hours' enjoying 'some of that picturesque sense of the past' that was lacking from places that had 'kept more abreast of the times', but what is interesting here are the repeated references to time itself in these passages, suggesting that, to the outsider, Llareggub and its environs are indeed out of step with the rest of the country, that it had not kept itself up to date, and this in turn contributes to the idea of a self-contained community, with its own created, disconnected history, a history that is central to its identity. Even the mention of 'characters' serves to differentiate and objectify the inhabitants, and to isolate this community further. Furthermore, by describing Llareggub in consumerist terms throughout this sequence, Thomas reveals the wholly reductive nature of consumerism. Only 'the contemplative' can even glimpse the genuine qualities of Llareggub ('that picturesque sense of the past', for example), whilst the leisure-seeking consumer will be unmoved. In Socialist terms, Thomas is suggesting that tourists have no

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<sup>569</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 33.

interest in exploiting the resources or labour of Llareggub, and that only ‘the contemplative’ would even try.

The ‘Voice of the Guide-Book’ concludes by noting that the ‘one place of worship, with its neglected graveyard, is of no architectural interest’, itself a telling description given the deliberate fetishizing of the chapel into a part of the holiday trail (one to be avoided, and unworthy, therefore, of pilgrimage). As if to reinforce the presence of the dead in Llareggub, however, the graveyard features several times in the text. For example, Thomas writes that ‘The owls are hunting. Look, over Bethesda gravestones one hoots and swoops and catches a mouse by Hannah Rees, Beloved Wife’.<sup>570</sup> This image, conflating death and life and love, is returned to shortly afterwards when the First Voice says: ‘Time passes. Listen. Time passes. An owl flies home past Bethesda, to a chapel in an oak. And the dawn inches up’.<sup>571</sup> Despite being ‘neglected’ (although, as Davies rightly asserts, ‘one thing *Under Milk Wood* does not neglect is its graveyard’),<sup>572</sup> the graveyard is frequently used, both by the narrator for setting the scene and by the characters of the play. For example, as morning breaks over the town, ‘[a] glee-party sings in Bethesda Graveyard, gay but muffled’ whilst ‘[v]egetables make love above the tenors’.<sup>573</sup> These images imply that it is the dead who are singing within their graves, a suggestion confirmed when the Second Voice adds that ‘dogs bark blue in the face’.<sup>574</sup> Indeed, the graveyard (or rather those buried within it) joins the singing that is started by the children and who are joined in their song by Captain Cat at his window. This is followed by:

#### FIRST VOICE

The music of the spheres is heard distinctly over Milk Wood. It is ‘The Rustle of Spring.’

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<sup>570</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 30.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>572</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. xxvi.

<sup>573</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 58.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

This pronouncement precedes the ‘glee-party’ line quoted above and pre-empts singing by a number of the characters, including Polly Garter who sings of her lovers (Tom, Dick and Harry, as well as ‘Little Willy Wee’) and which prompts Eli Jenkins to proclaim ‘Praise the Lord! We are a musical nation’.<sup>575</sup> This is followed shortly after by the ‘Second Voice’ saying ‘Love, sings the Spring’,<sup>576</sup> which in turn leads us into a further scene in which the children, being taught elocution by Gossamer Beynon, sing again, their voices mixing with Polly Garter’s and the instructions of Gossamer Beynon. Though the church may be of ‘no architectural interest’, it is a fundamental part of the community, its voice one of the chorus of living and dead, and one is therefore left to question, as a consequence, how many of the ‘less than five hundred souls’ which ‘inhabit’ the town actually belong to the living and how many to the dead. That the song joins the graveyard to the classroom via the welfare hall and the church emphasises this collective consciousness, the evolving song helping to trace a line of common feeling through them all.

Spring has a powerful effect on the majority of the characters, and it has a very powerful effect on Gossamer Beynon.<sup>577</sup> The Second Voice informs us that ‘Spring stirs Gossamer Beynon schoolmistress like a spoon’, an image which is recalled at the beginning of the elocution scene: ‘And Gossamer Beynon, schoolteacher, spoonstirred and quivering, teaches her slubberdegullion class’.<sup>578</sup> The influence of Spring seems to cause the singing of the

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<sup>575</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), pp. 60-61.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>577</sup> ‘Gossamer’s name, like her nature, and like so much in the play, is divided, one half ordinary and demotic, the other poetic and ethereal. “Gossamer” is air and flower, “Beynon” a good common South Welsh surname. This is where her ancestress Molly Bloom comes in, another Celtic creation, another man-made sex object with a difference, another woman with a double name and nature [...] Gossamer Beynon is right for the lightness and prettiness of the neat little schoolmistress, ordinary and familiar as she high-heels out of school. Even the sun in *Milk Wood* is ordinary and familiar as it boozes in those most sensual but transformed breasts, which are milky animal and strange as they nourish the sun, new and vegetable with their red berry nipples [...] Mother of the world and containing all the springs – the season, the spring in her step, the source of water, and the coiled energy of the deep self, Gossamer is Eve and Cleopatra and Molly Bloom, but Dylan Thomas’s version, double personality, prim teacher and sexual fantasist’. (Barbara Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 56.)

<sup>578</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 62.

children, Gossamer Beynon and Polly Garter to mix together more excitedly, and then to be joined by the voice of Sinbad Sailors, who is explaining to Mr. Waldo how much he loves Gossamer Beynon but how he hasn't the money to make his love known to her. Taken together, this creates a sequence of overlapping lines, as follows:

CHILDREN'S VOICES

It was a luvver and his lars  
With a a and a o and a a nonino...

GOSSAMER BEYNON

Naow, naow, naow, your eccents, children!  
It was a lover and his less  
With a hey and a hao and a hey nonino...

SINBAD

Oh, Mr Waldo,

FIRST VOICE

says Sinbad Sailors,

SINBAD

she's a lady all over.

[...]

SINBAD

And if only grandma'd die, cross my heart I'd go down on my knees Mr Waldo  
and I'd say Miss Gossamer I'd say

CHILDREN'S VOICES

When birds do sing a ding a ding a ding  
Sweet Luvvers luv the Spring...

SECOND VOICE

Polly Garter sings, still on her knees,

POLLY GARTER

Tom Dick and Harry were three fine men  
And I'll never have such

CHILDREN

ding a ding

POLLY GARTER

again.<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>579</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), pp. 62-63.

The interweaving of voices to create subtler shades of appreciable meanings reveals the common emotional state of the main protagonists of the scene, as well as the sense of this being a place beset by a genuine obsession with love. The comedy of the piece comes through with the suggestive ‘ding a ding’ line, however it is not a joke without poignancy given that Polly Garter sings of her dead lover. The real tension of the piece (relieved in part by the comedy) is around the yearnings that Polly Garter and Sinbad Sailors articulate, which are explicitly linked to death (‘if only grandma’d die’, and Polly singing of ‘little Willy Wee’ respectively), and when taken together juxtapose unfulfilled possibility with the longing that comes with loss. The connection between Sinbad and Polly is suggested by the former promising to ‘go down on [his] knees’ whilst the latter is literally already on hers, washing the floor of the welfare hall. This interplay between image and dialogue underlines in the listener’s mind the connection between the two, whilst also alluding to their different states of love, one with a love unknown, the other with a known love lost (both common conditions in *Under Milk Wood*). This unconscious link, much like that between Fallon and Rock in *The Doctor and the Devils*, emphasises their respective pain. However, whereas it was a corruption of work that was highlighted by the link between Fallon and Rock, here it is a common sense of yearning, illustrated by the image of genuflection.

Taken together, the dualistic nature of the place (seen as both Heaven and Hell, as stagnant and stirring), the complex nature of time and mortality, as well as the all-pervading sense of love and the loss or unattainability of love, we see a community created by Thomas that is deceptively complex, one that is not quite complete but that is equally not entirely fractured or incomplete. However, when we recall the ‘dark hinterland’ which serves as a backdrop to much of the creation of the play, this complexity reveals itself to be reflective of post-war, post-Holocaust, and post-atomic society itself (at the time the play was first performed), as well as, perhaps, the private life of the author. In this regard, we may recall the

line from Thomas's poem 'Our Eunuch Dreams' in which Thomas writes, 'This is the world. Have faith',<sup>580</sup> acknowledging, of course, that the world itself had changed significantly in the years since 1934 when the poem was first written. From a Socialist perspective, there is a desire to embrace 'the world', for all its faults and losses, to understand it and to heal it as a community from within that community. This is most evident in the poems of the Reverend Jenkins, the first of which praises the town itself, the second being a prayer for its inhabitants ('all poor creatures born to die')<sup>581</sup> and an acknowledgement that his God 'wilt be the first | To see our best side, not our worst.'<sup>582</sup> The challenge of healing a dualistic society (pre- and post-lapsarian, pre- and post-war) is that both sides, by necessity, exist in near-perfect balance.

### 4.3 Not Wholly Bad or Good

Myfanwy Price and Mog Edwards have a similar, if not quite so intangible, relationship as Sinbad Sailors has with Gossamer Beynon, writing letters to one another from opposite ends of the town but choosing never to go beyond the written word. Thomas, in his letter to Princess Caetani, describes how 'easily they could have been together, married, had children: but this is not the life for them: their passionate love, at just this distance, is all they need,'<sup>583</sup> and the listener is again presented with a complicated or compromised kind of love, one that this time exists not in memory (as in the case of Polly Garter) or in hope (as it is for Sinbad), but in fantasy. Indeed, Mog and Myfanwy seem to be in love with the idea of love more than they are with one another, although it would perhaps be more accurate to say that they are in love with the language and imagery of love. When introduced, Myfanwy ('dressmaker and sweetshop-keeper') is dreaming of 'her lover, tall as the town clock tower, Samson-syrup-gold-maned,

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<sup>580</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 18.

<sup>581</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 82.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>583</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 905.

whacking thighed and piping hot [...] scooping low over her lonely loving hotwaterbottled body'.<sup>584</sup> The 'Samson' description is hardly one which would apply to Mog Edwards, the town draper, whose response to the fantasy of Myfanwy is far from fiery:

I am a draper mad with love. I love you more than all the flannelette and calico, candlewick, dimity, crash and merino, tussore, cretonne, crepon, muslin, poplin, ticking and twill in the whole Cloth Hall of the world. [...] I will warm the sheets like an electric toaster, I will lie by your side like the Sunday roast.<sup>585</sup>

Myfanwy's description is lifted from romantic (almost, at moments, erotic) novels, whereas the rejoinder is far less sizzling, preferring an 'electric toaster' and 'the Sunday roast' to the 'piping hot' imagery of his 'hotwaterbottled' lover. The two are not so far apart though, with Myfanwy replying to Mog's tenderness with the equally tender (and suitably themed) promise to 'knit you a wallet of forget-me-not-blue, for the money to be comfy'. The dressmaker and the draper are perfect for one another, and yet they choose never to meet. It is enough for them to be in love, exchanging letters from opposite ends of the town.

The town's criss-crossing letters further articulate the peculiar blend of passion and prudence that we see in the monologues above. Willy Nilly, the postman who reads the post of everyone in Llareggub before he passes it on, recounts to Mog that:

Miss Price loves you with all her heart. Smelling of lavender today. She's down to the last of the elderflower wine but the quince jam's bearing up and she's knitting roses on the doilies. Last week she sold three jars of boiled sweets, pound of humbugs, half a box of jellybabies and six coloured photos of Llareggub. Yours for ever. Then twenty-one X's.<sup>586</sup>

His reply, steamed open and read by Willy Nilly's wife in the kitchen, begins with a lengthy heading on the notepaper describing his services and concludes, after the romantic entreaties, with 'a little message with a rubber stamp. Shop at Mog's!!!'.<sup>587</sup> It also includes similarly mundane reports of sales, but is revealing for the morbid undertone. He addresses Myfanwy as

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<sup>584</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 17.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

‘Beloved Myfanwy Price my Bride in Heaven’, and continues, ‘I love you until Death do us part and then we shall be together for ever and ever’. He concludes the letter by writing, ‘God be with you always Myfanwy Price and keep you lovely for me in His Heavenly Mansion. I must stop now and remain, Your Eternal, Mog Edwards’.<sup>588</sup> The hint of death in his heartfelt outpourings, when taken alongside the physical distance which he and his ‘lover’ insist upon, serves as another example of the ethereal quality of love in *Under Milk Wood*. Just as Captain Cat remembers his dead crew and Rosie Probert, Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard speaks to her two dead husbands, and Polly Garter sings of her long lost ‘Little Willy Wee’, here we see a couple whose love is abstracted, almost perfected, by death. For them death represents a new life, a life together, married, and they wait for the afterlife as if awaiting both normality and eternal bliss. At the end of the play, the First Voice, observing events in the graveyard, remarks that Mog and Myfanwy are ‘happily apart’, and that in ‘the warm White Book of Llareggub you will find the little maps of the islands of their contentment’. Myfanwy declares, ‘Oh, my Mog, I am yours forever’, whilst Mog ‘hugs his lovely money to his *own* heart’ after saying to Myfanwy, ‘Come to my arms’.<sup>589</sup> Financial concerns intrude upon their romance throughout the play (just as Sinbad wishes for the death of his grandmother, for example), and it is perhaps due to this that they await a perfect marriage in death, conscious of ‘His Heavenly Mansion’ and their life together there, ‘for ever’.

Either way, Myfanwy and Mog have a love which is unique to them. It is private, complicated, ‘not wholly bad or good’. Mr. and Mrs. Pugh, despite the murderous intentions of the former, exist similarly in a perpetual state of private equilibrium, balanced neatly, almost perfectly, by disapproval and secrets. Mr. Pugh reads ‘from *The Lives of the Great Poisoners*’<sup>590</sup> at the dinner table, and when asked by Mrs. Pugh what he is reading, replies that

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<sup>588</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), pp. 56- 57.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88. The italics are Thomas’s.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.



it is ‘a theological work, my dear. *Lives of the Great Saints*’. To this ‘Mrs Pugh smiles,’<sup>591</sup> because she already knows what her husband is reading (having been told earlier in the play by the indiscreet postman).<sup>592</sup> She is free to disapprove of him, to infer that he is no better than a pig, and he is free to ‘underline certain passages’ in his book as he ‘sidespies up at Mrs Pugh’, fantasising about her death. Just as Myfanwy and Mog will never meet, one is left with the distinct impression that Mr. Pugh will never poison his wife. Moreover, there is a similarity in their relationship to that of Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard to her two dead husbands, although in Mr. Pugh’s case it is not suicide that he is contemplating (assuming that Mr. Ogmores ‘hanged his collie’ as an act of mercy and not as murder). This again feeds into the notion of a self-reflective place, one where history repeats, where the past and the present overlap, where time passes without ever really passing at all. One might conclude that the endless planning of a murder that will never take place is perfectly appropriate in Llareggub for this very reason: death, love and life mingle together, just as it does elsewhere in the town.

Likewise, Mr. and Mrs. Cherry Owen have a love which is unique to them, and, by implication, perfect for them too:

CHERRY OWEN

I always say she’s got two husbands,

FIRST VOICE

says Cherry Owen.

CHERRY OWEN

one drunk and one sober.

FIRST VOICE

And Mrs Cherry simply says

MRS CHERRY OWEN

And aren’t I a lucky woman? Because I love them both.<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>591</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 69.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83 – 84.

The play is full of relationships such as this, marked by duality and by dichotomy:

Character	Relationships
Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard	Mr. Ogmores (deceased) Mr. Pritchard (deceased)
Mrs. Cherry Owen	Mr. Cherry Owen (sober) Mr. Cherry Owen (drunk)
Dai Bread	Mrs. Dai Bread One ('for the daytime') Mrs. Dai Bread Two ('for the night') <sup>594</sup>
Gossamer Beynon (unspoken)	Sinbad Sailors (eroticised, imagined)
Sinbad Sailors (spoken)	Gossamer Beynon (unapproachable, imagined)
Polly Garter	Many relationships with the men of Llareggub Little Willy Wee (deceased)
Myfanwy Price (real)	Mog Edwards (imagined/deceased)
Mog Edwards (real)	Myfanwy Price (imagined/deceased)
Mrs. Pugh	Mr. Pugh (public, caring, bullied) Mr. Pugh (private, murderous)

I would argue that the reason for this structural duality is Thomas's wish to emphasise the double nature of us all ('not wholly bad or good'), and through the exaggerated, shameless way in which the 'good' and the 'bad' are revealed to the audience, he is leading us away from judgemental conclusions, away from the shame of having this multifaceted nature, towards an acceptance of it. That this is done through a prism of love ensures that the moral aspects of his argument are upheld, that Llareggub is perceived to be idyllic, not because it is prelapsarian, but precisely because it manages to contain and assimilate both pre- and post-lapsarian states of being in a way which is not emotionless or amoral, but overflowing with emotion, that is overtly, realistically moral and immoral (however subjective those terms may be). What is not innocent is understood, what is not done towards love is forgiven through love. By being both pre- and post-lapsarian, Llareggub must exist out of time and out of place, within its own temporal and geographic space, where the abundance of life, driven by the ever-present spirit of Spring, means that even the line between life and death is blurred, where the youngest child

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<sup>594</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 54.

makes ancient folklore, and the local vicar creates an ever-evolving bardic/druidic myth of the place and his flock.

In this way, Thomas represents Freud's notion of the id as espoused in his famous lectures on psychoanalysis, which, for reasons that will, I hope, become apparent, shall be quoted specifically but at length:

[The id] is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle. The logical laws of thought do not apply in the id, and this is true above all of the law of contradiction. Contrary impulses exist side by side, without cancelling each other out or diminishing each other: at the most they may converge to form compromises under the dominating economic pressure towards the discharge of energy. [...] we perceive with surprise an exception to the philosophical theorem that space and time are necessary forms of our mental acts. There is nothing in the id that corresponds to the idea of time; there is no recognition of the passage of time, and [...] no alteration in its mental processes is produced by the passage of time. Wishful impulses which have never passed beyond the id, but impressions, too, which have been sunk into the id by repression, are virtually immortal; after the passage of decades they behave as though they had just occurred. They can only be recognized as belonging to the past, can only lose their importance and be deprived of their cathexis of energy, when they have been made conscious by the work of analysis [...]<sup>595</sup>

It is worth noting here that the earliest title for *Under Milk Wood* was *The Town that was Mad* (later *The Village of the Mad*),<sup>596</sup> and, in the original synopsis for the play, the townspeople, having been put on trial and given, by the prosecution, a description of what the sane world should be like, decide that they were content to stay mad. In the finished play (if we can indeed claim it as such, given Thomas's untimely death), it would be possible, I suspect, to assign to many of the characters aspects of the id as described by Freud, that the town itself has qualities of the personality structure he detailed. For example, we are told at the very beginning that '[t]ime passes', but, as described above, time in the play is mutable and mortality is uncharacteristically slippery, as the dead appear from the very beginning. It is as if Captain

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<sup>595</sup> Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Standard Edition)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1989), p. 92.

<sup>596</sup> Douglas Cleverdon, *The Growth of Milk Wood* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd, 1969), pp. 5-6.

Cat's dream which opens the dramatic action of the play is a direct allusion to Freud's assertion that 'impressions, too, which have been sunk into the id by repression, are virtually immortal'. This equally applies to Rosie Probert, and to Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard with her two dead husbands. 'Contrary impulses' can be seen in the relationship between Myfanwy Price and Mog Edwards, conducted from either end of the same town (they wish to be together but stay as far apart as the town allows), and perhaps here we also see an example of the kind of 'compromises under the dominating economic pressure towards the discharge of energy' that these contradictions may, according to Freud, form, in particular in the couple's obsession with finances as a part of romantic metaphor ('I will knit you a wallet of forget-me-not blue, for the money to be comfy', 'And all the bells of the tills of the town shall ring for our wedding').<sup>597</sup> Rosie Probert can perhaps also be viewed as exemplifying the notion that there 'is nothing in the id that corresponds to the idea of time; there is no recognition of the passage of time', when she says:

Remember her.  
She is forgetting.  
[...]  
I have forgotten that I was ever born.<sup>598</sup>

In the playful construction of an ancient druidic past, Billy Beynon's actions suggest 'an exception to the philosophical theorem that space and time are necessary forms of our mental acts', that within Llareggub and its environs, the past and the present, even at the farthest extremes, can collide and mingle, that the ancient landscape can be imagined by a young boy and then experienced by all. Even in the season we can see the id reflected: Spring is the very time when 'a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle' is at its most acute, and it is at its most obvious in

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<sup>597</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 18.

<sup>598</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

‘Gossamer Beynon, schoolteacher, spoonstirred and quivering’, as well as the children she teaches, who sing songs of love and procreation, or play kissing games in the woods.

In Thomas’s (later maligned,<sup>599</sup> it must be said) ‘Answers to an Enquiry’, two of the answers he gave are, in particular, worth mentioning here. Firstly, in response to question 4 (‘Have you ever been influenced by Freud and how do you regard him?’), Thomas replied: ‘Yes. Whatever is hidden should be made naked. To be stripped of darkness is to be clean, to strip of darkness is to make clean. [...] poetry must drag further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realise’.<sup>600</sup> Secondly, in answer to question 6 (‘As a poet what distinguishes you, do you think, from the ordinary man?’), Thomas answered: ‘Only the use of the medium of poetry to express the causes and forces which are the same in all men’.<sup>601</sup> So we see that Thomas’s approach to Freud is concerned with openness, with understanding, and with acceptance of the libidinous and otherwise ‘hidden’ aspects of ourselves, aspects which ‘are the same in all men’, thereby emphasising the egalitarian and Socialist principles underpinning the play. In *Under Milk Wood*, we can observe the common drives of all the characters echoing Nature, echoing Spring, and in this there is a levelling-out effect whereby the commonality of thought and feeling presupposes and reinforces a sense of community, of shared dreams, of a common bond, and this notion in turn destabilises any hierarchy or elite, as if Thomas is asking how such social structures could (or should be allowed to) exist in a world where everyone, openly or secretly, is driven by the same set of instincts. Indeed, one prominent archetype of authority is undermined at the very beginning of the play when we hear Organ Morgan dream of the local police officer, P.C. Atilla

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<sup>599</sup> ‘I haven’t, of course, read the chapters you’ve sent me in any order, but, from what I have read, it seems to me that you’ve quoted that make-it-clean-boys part of my Answers to an Enquiry about ½ dozen times’ (*Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 360).

<sup>600</sup> The full response to this question is included in a footnote in the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* chapter when I discuss ‘The Peaches’.

<sup>601</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writing*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971), p. 150.

Rees, in onanistic pose, ‘his truncheon out [...] playing cadenzas by the pump’,<sup>602</sup> before Atilla Rees himself, still half-asleep, urinates in his police helmet believing it to be a chamber pot, his own unconscious mind mocking him as he does so;<sup>603</sup> marital authority is undermined when Mrs. Willy Nilly dreams of being spanked at school;<sup>604</sup> and religious authority is undermined by the barely disguised longings of Jack Black the cobbler, ‘driving out the bare, bold girls from the sixpenny hops of his nightmares’ with characteristic religious zeal.<sup>605</sup>

In this exposed, ‘naked’ community of the play, one driven by love, longing and loss, other personality structures, such as the ego and superego, are subordinated, rendered inert, and the sublimation of powerful desires by the other personality structures (ones which would normally transform them into work or art or whatever else served to disguise these impulses) fails or is entirely non-existent. There is, consequently, a dizzying, surreal quality to the play, one which hints, as I say, at a deeper, more symbolic meaning. I also mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter that the backdrop to the writing of *Under Milk Wood* was traumatic for Thomas, that loss was ever-present during this productive, creative period which, it transpired, also coincided with the end of his own life, and it is easy to locate within the play a desire for the dead to speak, for psychological trauma to be felt (or replaced) with a more poetic melancholy, and for life to simply go on, to repeat. If there is an underlying psychoanalytic quality to *Under Milk Wood* (and I would say there clearly is), then it would hardly be surprising given the life of the author at the time of writing it.

I shall not comment much further on Freudian interpretations of Thomas’s work, this having been done more effectively by other critics.<sup>606</sup> However, to add to the notion of the

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<sup>602</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>604</sup> MRS WILLY NILLY: Don’t spank me, please, teacher, SECOND VOICE: whimpers his wife at his side, but every night of her married life she has been late for school. (*Ibid.*)

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>606</sup> See in particular John Goodby, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

destabilising effect of this quality on social hegemony, I would add that Goodby sums this up well with the following:

Although [Thomas] recasts it for an electronic age and his sense of the grotesque and carnivalesque subversion hardly embraces communal solidarity, *Under Milk Wood* nevertheless resembles an ‘understand[ing of] the human body not as the mortal husk of an individual ... but as the collective great body of the people’. In doing so, it realises some of the populist potential, which might, had Thomas lived, have also emerged in the poetry.<sup>607</sup>

The path that Thomas traverses between the ‘carnavalesque’ (with all its inherent potential to destabilise societal norms), the ‘populist’ and the political, where Thomas seemingly moved beyond (certainly away from) a polemical language of revolution, gives *Under Milk Wood* a joyous quality, one which turns always towards acceptance, perhaps the only quality which unites these three ideas. *Under Milk Wood* does not just disrupt social norms, it shows the good that can come from that disruption. However, as Hardy asserts, ‘[a]dultery, illegitimacy, drunkenness, jealousy, religious narrowness, and domestic oppression are present, but uncomplicated, made sweet and easy’.<sup>608</sup> I would suggest that Thomas does this for precisely the reason of engaging the audience’s empathy, sympathy and our own sense of acceptance which Thomas has demonstrated throughout the play. Everything happens within the context of love, and this is what makes the disruptive and the painful seem ‘sweet and easy’. Indeed, crucially, it appears this way precisely because of the nature of the community that Thomas has created. Hardy, on Thomas’s approach to nature, alludes to this when describing Thomas’s role as a ‘green’ (environmentalist, in a sense) poet:

Though several Thomas critics convincingly interpret Thomas’s vision of natural unity as religious, sometimes pantheistic, sometimes Christian, it may also be read as agnostic poetry, a physical rather than a metaphysical vision, an acceptance of the human being’s place in what Wordsworth called the very world in which we

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<sup>607</sup> John Goodby, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 421.

<sup>608</sup> Barbara Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 86.

live, without invoking the supernatural – which after all involves hierarchy and hegemony – except as metaphor [...]<sup>609</sup>

This thesis argues for the paramount importance of ‘an acceptance of the human being’s place’ in the ‘very world in which we live’ in *Under Milk Wood*. Much of it appears ‘supernatural’, such as the abundance of deceased and the dismembered narrative voices, but it is the kindness of the characters, the tolerance, and their love which pervades the play far more than the dead.

That dreams have a major role in the play, and that the waking moments retain much the same dreamlike quality, suggests that Thomas also wanted us to see these characters ‘naked’ and, importantly, whole, composed of ‘contrary impulses’ common to them all, to *us all*, and with the dreamt impulses being as essential and as genuine as those expressed when awake. We might also recall Thomas’s letter to Princess Caetani, in which he says that ‘I hope to make you utterly familiar with the places and the people; the pieces of the town will fit together; the reasons for all these behaviours (so far but hinted at) will be made apparent; & there the town will be laid alive before you. And only you will know it’. Like *Milk Wood* itself, which can be the Garden of Eden or Gomorrah depending on outlook, Thomas allows the listener to respond privately, subjectively, to the play, to imagine themselves as part of the town, and to be accepted by it. In this way Thomas reconciles the behaviour of the characters with his desire for the listener to become ‘an inhabitant’ of the town, as we are granted the same privilege as the dreamers and fantasists of Llareggub. We are accepted regardless of whoever we are and whatever we may think or feel. This is the true spirit of Socialism, and it is the guiding principle of equality, and of openness, that underpins Thomas’s play.

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<sup>609</sup> Barbara Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 140.



#### 4.4 Too Great a Sense of Eternity

*Under Milk Wood* is driven not by action, but by the characters that Thomas portrays. Some of these characters have suffered great loss, reflecting Thomas's own private losses which coincided with the final drafting of the play. However, there is also great renewal in the play. The people of Llareggub, as well as the place itself, the hills and the woods, are in a constant cycle of rejuvenation and reinvention, epitomised by Spring that is everywhere and is in the love and vitality of the characters. The play ends with:

The Wood, whose every tree-foot's cloven in the black glad sight of the hunters of lovers, that is a God-built garden to Mary Ann Sailors who knows there is Heaven on earth and the chosen people of His kind fire in Llareggub's land, that is the fairday farmhands' wantoning ignorant chapel of bridesbeds, and, to the Reverend Eli Jenkins, a greanleaved sermon on the innocence of men, the suddenly wind-shaken wood springs awake for the second dark time this one Spring day.<sup>610</sup>

In the closing lines 'spring' is mentioned twice, emphasising its importance in the play. As Hardy says of the 'spoonstirred' Gossamer Beynon, this is all the springs: 'the season, the spring in her step, the source of water, and the coiled energy of the deep self'.<sup>611</sup> The Wood is a source of life and of spiritual sustenance, reinvigorating the people of the town beneath it and embodying whatever it is that they need it to be, because, as in the play, within both the loss (destruction) and the rejuvenation (creation) there is acceptance of whatever is created out of the loss. As MacNeice wrote of Deirdre and Naisi in his *Canto in Memoriam Dylan Thomas*, 'their doom may bless | Posterity', a revitalising cycle that we see in characters such as Rosie Probert, Mary Ann Sailors and Polly Garter. It is in the actions of Billy Beynon laying out the druidic stones and reflected in the 'the warm White Book of Llareggub' that the Reverend

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<sup>610</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Folio Society, 1997), pp. 88 – 89.

<sup>611</sup> Barbara Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 56.

writes, as well as the children playing kissing games as Sinbad Sailors and Gossamer Beynon yearn for one another.

This schema is necessarily dualistic, and it reflects the dualism of the play overall – people are neither wholly bad nor good, the dead and the living cohabit, the play is equal parts day and night, life and dream. This recalls Freud’s description of the id, in which ‘[c]ontrary impulses exist side by side, without cancelling each other out or diminishing each other’,<sup>612</sup> as well as Goodby’s comment that ‘[t]he sexual symbolism is both blatant and innocent, in accordance with Llareggub’s emotional economy, poised between infant and adult sexuality, between voyeuristic desire and physical enjoyment’.<sup>613</sup> As we have seen, Thomas achieves this poise, this balancing of ‘contrary impulses’, in (amongst others) the physical, temporal, emotional and moral aspects of the play through interweaving the characters and the place so absolutely that we as listeners are compelled to consider it as a whole, to accept the spectrum without judgement.

This is, in essence, why I would consider *Under Wilk Wood* a political play, at least in as far as I have established many of Thomas’s other works (radio scripts, film scripts and short stories) as being political. This brings us back to Hardy’s comment that Thomas’s work ‘may be read as agnostic poetry, a physical rather than a metaphysical vision, an acceptance of the human being’s place in what Wordsworth called the very world in which we live, without invoking the supernatural – which after all involves hierarchy and hegemony – except as metaphor’.<sup>614</sup> There is a practical purpose to the tolerance in the play, as if Thomas is defining a model for a post-war state, one of forgiveness and tolerance, where the very lack of

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<sup>612</sup> Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Standard Edition)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1989), p. 92.

<sup>613</sup> John Goodby, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 420. Cf. M. Wynn Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), p. 231: ‘An alternative hymn of praise and thanksgiving for all the inventive ways of the incorrigible flesh in a small Welsh seaside town, it is also a kind of extended nursery rhyme for adults, such rhymes having been the cradle of Thomas the poet.’

<sup>614</sup> Barbara Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 140.

judgmental authority figures (hierarchical or in any sense hegemonistic) underpins and even enhances ‘the very world in which we live’, a phrase which echoes Thomas’s own ‘This is the world. Have faith’. The lack of state actors (with the exception of P.C. Atilla Rees, who is little more than a figure of fun) is not in itself mentioned, and at no point is there reference to an overthrow, no revolution, no dismantling of the state apparatus, nothing which might correspond to the suspicious, accusatory figures that existed in the original outline of ‘The Town That Was Mad’. Instead it is a place that governs, moderates and functions through the interaction of the community itself, that seemingly always has done, and seemingly always will. Thomas describes an almost utopian community, one assembled (or perhaps reassembled) from painful fragments of the past, just as the world was doing after another terrible war. Yet the timeless, infinitely repeating, self-referential nature of *Under Milk Wood* alludes to something more than just post-war reconstruction. Caitlin Macnamara said of her then late husband that ‘Dylan’s philosophy was really that of the man who sympathises with the poor and downtrodden and looks to the Left for an answer; it didn’t go far beyond that [...]’.<sup>615</sup> In counterpoint (or perhaps support), she continues:

He had a total lack of hatred, and couldn’t share the feelings that people had at the time. He didn’t believe in all those false heroics, patriotism and all that nonsense. [...] To him no one country was better than another: all men were equal, regardless of race or religion, and he recognised no boundaries between people. He bore no enmity against people because they were black or because they were German. The whole notion of war was ridiculous to him, and he told me that he would never ever, under any circumstances, kill a human being; he took very little interest in the course of the war, and had hardly any respect for Churchill or any of the other war leaders; he appeared totally unmoved by it all; he had too great a sense of eternity to contemplate such minor things.<sup>616</sup>

The ‘sense of eternity’, the ‘total lack of hatred’ and the notion that ‘all men were equal’ are distinctly present in *Under Milk Wood*, unadorned and therefore unrestricted by

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<sup>615</sup> Caitlin Thomas, George Tremlett, *Caitlin: A Warring Absence* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), p. 71.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

contemporary politics and political theory. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the play represents a more private politics than previously seen, one that refines many of the political beliefs expressed by Thomas in earlier works into a simplified message of love and acceptance, one for all times but of particular relevance to a world recovering from war. Through the characters, through knowing their desires and their losses, Thomas indicated that he hoped we too would become a part of this forgiving, accepting community, that, by using the devices and techniques outlined above, we would ‘know the town as an inhabitant of it’.<sup>617</sup>

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<sup>617</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 904.

## CONCLUSION

I am a Socialist, and, so far as I know, there is no Socialist party.<sup>618</sup>

Thomas was a paid propagandist during the Second World War. His work supported the objectives (military and otherwise) of the British government and he used his skills as a poet to serve as a mouthpiece for the Empire. When one reads ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’, he brings to bear the precision and clarity of the accomplished propaganda writer, one who knows how to rouse a mob and strike a defiant tone in the face of seemingly overwhelming aggression. Or does he? Might one rather say that Thomas survived the Second World War with his liberty intact by using his skills as a poet to write inspiring, Socialist-themed films and broadcasts (some banned for their seditious content), that spread a message of hope, emancipation and solidarity despite an onslaught of Fascism and totalitarianism sweeping in from continental Europe? Is to read ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ to experience the defiant tone of a true Socialist, stripped of scientific language and transient political theory? Does it contain a message that is the very heart of Socialism itself, that it is a call to arms, a call for struggle? Perhaps neither of these is correct. Perhaps both are.

Does it matter that Thomas was a self-proclaimed Socialist in May 1951? Proving definitively that Thomas was a Socialist might lead us away from assessing his work critically, away from how the political milieu of the time influenced his output, and back to a defence of the man, back to saving ‘Dylan’ from himself, to saving him from the judgements of the past, such as Kingsley Amis’s claim that Thomas was ‘a pernicious figure, one who has helped to get Wales and Welsh poetry a bad name and generally done lasting harm to both’.<sup>619</sup> Is it right

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<sup>618</sup> *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), p. 889.

<sup>619</sup> George Tremlett, *Dylan Thomas: In the Mercy of his Means* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1992), p. xxxvii.

that we should defend Thomas against a claim as vague and unsubstantiated as this? I would argue not, but I have found during my research that the urge, time and again, is to view Thomas's political stance as a way of understanding his personal and private behaviour, as if the freedoms espoused in *Under Milk Wood* (especially when viewed through the lens of political theory) might somehow negate the denunciations of past critics. It is as if there is always the temptation to claim that Thomas (or 'Dylan', more appropriately) was a prototype hippy, and that, therefore, assessments of him as a drunk or a womaniser or as careless with the money on which his family depended are invalid given the socio-political agenda of his life. This is dangerous territory, but it is likewise familiar territory given the critical history around Thomas and his work that has underpinned this research.

This thesis has attempted, as far as is possible, to avoid defending Thomas the man, in spite of the wealth of material that condemns him, and rather focus on a close textual analysis of the works. In doing so, analysis reveals a recurring theme that one might term 'Socialist' but which might also be called 'a greanleaved sermon on the innocence of men'. His film scripts reflect the times during which they were written to a large extent, the themes of revival and renewal consistent with those found later in *Under Milk Wood*, as is the message of forgiveness found in 'These Are The Men' where he writes of 'young men, [...] | Who have grown into manhood out of a school of horror' one day being 'comrades and brothers, workers and makers, | After the agony of the world at war is over'. On the subject of war, Thomas found in the 'infinitely tender humble' Wilfred Owen a kindred spirit, a man who was 'the pleader of the sufferings of men'. Through his own broadcasts, delivered without 'contempt for the public', Thomas did not exactly plead for his fellow man, rather gently cajole them directly, asking questions such as 'If a man can't talk politics when he's got a pneumatic drill in his hand, when can he then [?]'.

This more populist polemic was found in Thomas's much-loved reminiscences, works that hinted at the issues of the world but refrained from trying too hard to highlight them, but they find a counterpoint in 'Persian Oil', a work so charged with anger at the prevailing economic system that it is barely recognisable as one of Thomas's creations, despite much of the text being based on correspondence Thomas wrote from Abadan to Caitlin back home in Wales. Through Thomas's monologue, we are shown the poor struggling to preserve their dignity despite their poverty, despite the position that their poverty has put them in, bringing it closer to *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, where his stories about 'Old Garbo', Lou in 'One Warm Saturday', and Aunt Annie in 'The Peaches' deal with a similar struggle to maintain a sense of dignity and of self (in Lou's case, her struggle is to retain the very right and ability to hope and dream) in the face of harsh economic realities. These same realities spark in both *Rebecca's Daughters* and *The Doctor and the Devils* (both of which have at their core economic exploitation) the kind of civil unrest that Thomas presciently alluded to at the end of 'Persian Oil'.

Thomas's ability to understand hardship and loss in terms of the acute emotional impact they have on an individual drives *Under Milk Wood*, a play that, as Davies says, falls 'between light and shade'. Much like *Portrait*, which Thomas described as 'mostly pot-boilers', *Under Milk Wood* has an unassuming quality that masks the depth and complexity of the characters. Holbrook claimed that it 'would not have had its popular success were it not essentially cruel and untender, and full of seamy hints, obscenities',<sup>620</sup> which I would argue is a crude misreading of the play's exact opposite qualities, namely love, forgiveness, acceptance, and the way that memory endures. It could be called a Socialist play, by which I mean that it concerns itself with a self-governing collective, one in which personal freedom is held to be of

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<sup>620</sup> David Holbrook, *Llareggub Revisited: Dylan Thomas and the State of Modern Poetry* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1962), p. 201.

greater importance than status or wealth. It is a Socialist play in that it presents a society which embodies hope and renewal, and that crucially understands that we are 'not wholly bad or good'. Thomas arrived at this vision of a loving, fallible community after many years of writing poetry, film scripts, radio plays, lectures, reminiscences and short stories, all of which, in one way or another, contributed to its structure, imagery and language. It represents the perfect expression of Thomas's beliefs as a Socialist for whom no adequate Socialist party existed, and the emphasis on revival, taken alongside the forgiving nature of the inhabitants of the town, makes it the ideal blueprint for a country (and a continent) riven by disunion in the years preceding its first performance. That *Under Milk Wood* is a Socialist play does not fully explain its exact meaning or purpose, but it might, given all that has happened in the United Kingdom, Europe and the West since it was written, explain its enduring appeal and recurring relevance to those who take the time to listen.



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